

PATH DEPENDENT AND RISK AVERSE: IS RETAIL PLANNING INHIBITED BY A CULTURE OF FEAR?

**Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the
University of Liverpool for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by:**

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing that is the outcome of work done by, or in collaboration with others, except where specifically indicated in the text. It has not been previously submitted, in part or completely, to any university or institution for any degree, diploma, or other qualification.

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ABSTRACT

As new digital technology fundamentally changes the way people shop, retail firms are increasingly seeking to optimise their store portfolios so that they effectively support the provision of an omni-channel retail offer, which is leading to the decline of many traditional retail spaces. This thesis seeks to explore this issue, by considering why, in the face of such profound structural changes in retailing, the prevailing response of planners has been to reemphasise support for ‘town-centre-first’, despite the fact that such an approach appears fundamentally misaligned with the issues that are driving decline today. Utilising a mixed methods approach, involving a detailed historical analysis of the evolution of retail planning in England and in-depth interviews with planners, this thesis seeks to understand why it is that town-centre-first continues to pervade as a strategic approach in retail planning. In doing so, it will be shown that retail planning exhibits evidence of having become path dependent, which, it is proposed, is reflective of an increasing tendency towards risk-averse decision-making in planning more widely. In considering why risk-aversion has become a dominant characteristic of decision making in retail planning, this thesis builds upon the small but growing body of literature, which proposes that ‘fear’, as an emotional state, has come to have a significant influence over the decision-making behaviour of planners. In doing so, it is argued that a culture of ‘fear’ within planning practice is acting to inhibit the development of radical solutions to the decline of high street and town centre environments, ultimately resulting in a continuation of existing strategic policy approaches.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ATCM	Association of Town Centre Management/Association of Town and City Management
BDP	Building Design Partnership
BID	Business Improvement District
BPF	British Property Federation
BRC	British Retail Consortium
BCSC	British Council of Shopping Centres
CBD	Central Business District
CBHP	CB Hillier Parker
CBRE	CB Richard Ellis
CDP	Community Development Project
DBIS	Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
DCLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
DCPN	Development Control Policy Note
DETR	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
DoE	Department of the Environment
DoH	Department of Health
DTEDC	Distributive Trade Economic Development Council
DTLR	Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
EU	The European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IGD	Institute of Grocery Distribution
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LDC	Local Data Company
LGA	Local Government Association
MHLG	Ministry of Housing and Local Government
MTCP	Ministry of Town and Country Planning
MoT	Ministry of Transport
MRA	Main Retail Area
NEF	New Economics Foundation
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
ONS	Office for National Statistics
ORG	Oxford Retail Group
OXIRM	Oxford Institute of Retail Management
PAG	Planning Advisory Group
PPG	Planning Policy Guidance Note
PPS	Planning Policy Statement
RTPI	Royal Town Planning Institute
SEU	Social Exclusion Unit
SRB	Single Regeneration Budget
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
UKSC	United Kingdom Supreme Court
URPI	Unit for Retail Planning Information
US	United States of America
UTF	Urban Task Force
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Research Context

The words high street and decline seem to have become synonymous with one another over the last 10 years. Images of boarded-up-shops, or signs announcing impending store closures have become commonplace, while news articles proclaiming the slow demise of high streets seem to have proliferated since to beginning of the global financial crisis in late-2007. While recent recessionary pressures have played a significant role, the depth of many problems facing high streets and town centres speaks to a more profound structural change in retailing. The rise of digital technology is fundamentally changing the way people shop, redefining the relationship between consumers and retailers, and paving the way for new, non-physical retail spaces, which transcend the barriers of the physical world. Today, a smart phone and an internet connection is all that is needed to turn any ‘place’ into a ‘market’, and as new technological innovations become an increasingly ingrained part of our lives, so too, consumers expect to be able to shop anytime, anywhere, anyhow.

The implications of these changes are profound. Retail is one of the most important sectors within the British economy, accounting for approximately 20% of GDP and employing over 3 million people (DBIS, 2012). As new technology has emerged, this has resulted in almost all aspects of retail changing, from design and merchandising, through logistics, IT, marketing and media engagement, all the way to store layout and location. For many retailers, consolidation has become the dominant strategy, with firms seeking to optimise their store portfolios so that they effectively support the provision of an omni-channel retail offer. In line with this, programmes of store closures, relocations and ‘right-sizes’ have become common, with retailers

increasingly maintaining a physical presence in only the most profitable locations. In retail today, being in the right place is more important than ever and, as a result, high streets and town centres are suffering, as retail firms adjust their spatial profiles, so that they are optimised for the digital retail era.

In many ways, the government's response to the decline of high streets and town centres has been quite pragmatic. Not only have they acknowledged that the challenges facing many areas are unlike anything experienced before, but they have also emphasised that in many instances, the changes are likely to be irreversible. Accordingly, they have advocated that local authorities formulate strategic responses that fundamentally address the wants and needs of local communities and businesses, providing town centre spaces where citizens can come together and engage in all manner of social, economic or cultural activities. The need to diversify and adapt the existing town centre offer is seen as being critical and, although retail still has a role to play; it can no longer be the foundation of town centres. Yet, for all of this, the government continue to support 'town-centre-first', as a strategic approach in planning, despite the fact that this approach appears to run counter to almost every other recommendation they make. On the one hand, the government advocate new and inventive strategic responses, which are aimed at diversifying town centres and making them conducive to the wants and needs of local communities. On the other hand, they suggest that local authorities should look to enforce the principles of town-centre-first, which arguably serve to reinforce the existing developmental status quo, as well as the intrinsic link between retail and town centres.

Given this, there are important questions that must be asked regarding what it is that continued support for town-centre first is intended to achieve. Almost all evidence today, suggests that town centres are going to have to change, and for many centres, such change is likely to involve a shift away from retail and towards other land uses. As such, it is arguable that the any strategic approach that emphasises town-centre-first in planning is intrinsically flawed, because, such a policy approach is fundamentally misaligned with the issues that are driving the decline of high streets and town centres. While the potential long-term impacts of such a policy position are unclear, wider sectoral evidence would suggest that such an approach has the potential to cause more harm than good, as it may obscure from local authorities the

importance of moving away from retail towards a more diversified town centre offer. For this reason, it is contended that research in this area is necessary, if Britain's high streets and town centres are to thrive in the future.

1.2 Research Framework

Due to contemporary nature of the problems facing high streets and town centres, there has been, as of yet, little research assessing the various approaches to tackling high street and town centre decline. Much existing literature, both academic and industry based, has tended to focus on what retail is likely to look like in the future (Bamfield, 2013; Doherty and Chadwick, 2010; Thompson et al. 2012), how physical retail spaces are being impacted by the emergence of new digital technology (Singleton et al., 2016; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011) and what the most effective strategies will be to reverse decline (BCSC, 2013; BRC, 2012; Morton and Dericks, 2013). It is the purpose of this research, therefore, to contribute to filling this gap, by seeking to understand why it is that local authorities continue to support town-centre-first, when wider sectoral evidence would suggest that such a policy is fundamentally misaligned with contemporary issues. In order to achieve this, this research will explore how local planning authorities are formulating contemporary strategic responses for retail, focussing specifically on the considerations that influence their development. In doing so, it will seek to offer an insight into planners' decision-making, ascertaining why they make decisions as they do and considering what factors influence this process.

1.3 Thesis Structure

The purpose of this research project is to examine the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies in England, in order to determine why it is that town-centre-first continues to underpin planning practice. Accordingly, this thesis is intended to present the findings of this research project and, in line with this, will be structured as follows:

Chapter 2 provides a detailed examination of the changes occurring in retail today, including the responses of both retailers and the government. It will examine how new digital technology is fundamentally changing the expectations of consumers and, as a result, is leading to the decline of many high street and town centre retail

environments. It will also assess the responses of both retailers and the government, in order to illustrate the apparent misalignment between the contemporary forces that are driving decline and the continued support for town-centre-first within planning.

Chapter 3 builds upon this, by establishing an appropriate methodological approach that will enable this research project to determine why it is that town-centre-first continues to pervade in retail planning. In doing so, it will suggest that any research in this area needs to be mindful of both contemporary and historical influences over decision-making and that, as such, it will be necessary to analyse both the historical practice of retail planning and the contemporary formulation of retail planning strategies. Following on from this, it will present a detailed assessment of how the methodological framework for this project has been developed.

Chapters 4 through 9 provide a detailed historical analysis of how retail planning has evolved in England, including a consideration of factors that are relevant to understanding how and why planning decisions made in regard of retail, have occurred as they have. Chapter 4 will examine the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning, while Chapters 5 through 9 will consider how retail planning has evolved since the end of the Second World. The intrinsic links between retail planning and the broader objective of planning for town centres will be explored and through an analysis of the historical evolution of retail planning policy, it will be shown that retail planning has retained remarkable continuity in its approach, despite the widespread changes that have occurred in society, the economy and politics.

Chapter 10 draws together the evidence presented thus far, identifying those historically pervasive influences that can be seen to have dominated strategic decision-making in retail planning. In doing so, it will argue that retail planning exhibits clear evidence of having become path dependent and that this may serve as a frame of reference for understanding the continuing pervasiveness of town-centre-first within retail planning today. It will also offer up several possible explanations for why this is the case, including the increasing tendency towards risk-aversion in planning more widely, as well as the potential impact of psychological factors, such as emotion.

Chapters 11 and 12 will provide an overview and analysis of the research findings from the primary research phase of this project. Chapter 11 will consider how local planning authorities understand the contemporary processes of change occurring in retail today, both in terms of the challenges being faced and their likely causes. Chapter 12 will then consider how planners are seeking to respond to these issues, in order to identify the primary influences of contemporary retail planning strategies. Throughout both chapters, the views of local authorities will be compared to other local stakeholders and wider evidence, in order to identify points of commonality and difference.

Chapter 13 brings together the evidence from the primary research phase with the evidence from the historical analysis, in order to present the ultimate findings of this research project. It will be subsequently shown that, based upon evidence collected as part of this project, retail planning continues to exhibit strong evidence of path dependence, which can help to explain the pervasiveness of town-centre-first in contemporary planning practice. However, it will be noted that, while path dependence can help us to understand *how* town-centre-first has been able to pervade in retail planning, it is insufficient in explaining *why* it has been able to pervade. Accordingly, this chapter will build upon evidence from Chapter 10 to propose that continuity in retail planning reflects the inherently risk averse tendencies of planners, which are themselves proposed to be an outcome of the increasing influence of ‘fear’, as an emotional state in planning.

2 THE DECLINE OF BRITAIN'S HIGH STREETS: RETAIL AND RECESSION IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL CONSUMERISM

2.1 Introduction

Since the United Kingdom slipped into recession in late 2008, the decline of Britain's high streets and town centres has been a common topic of discussion throughout the country. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the wider contextual circumstances of this decline, by considering how short-term economic and long-term sectoral changes have affected both retailer and consumer behaviours, as well as the emerging political responses to it. The chapter begins by examining how retailers have adapted to the combined threats of an extended economic downturn (section 2.2) and the rise of new digital technology (section 2.3). The chapter then moves on to consider the response of the government to the increasingly evident decline of high streets and town centres (section 2.4). Particular focus is placed upon the government's continued support for 'town-centre-first', as well as the body of evidence that suggests this policy is neither appropriate nor sustainable, given the contemporary forces of change that are driving the decline of high streets and town centres (section 2.5). The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of what this could mean for the future of town centres, identifying where research will be necessary (section 2.6).

2.2 The Global Financial Crisis and Its Effects on Retail in Britain

In 2008, the global economy entered into one of the longest and most severe economic downturns in recent history. The starting point for this was the global financial crisis of 2007/08, which led to one of the deepest periods of recession to occur in the western world since the Great Depression (IMF, 2009). The collapse of financial markets and the subsequent failure of several major national and international financial institutions prompted an unprecedented level of government intervention, as nations sought to bring stability to their economies. While the financial crisis itself only lasted for a relatively short period, its effects on the wider global economy lasted far longer. During the course of the economic downturn, almost all major western nations experienced some period of negative economic growth, with many experiencing extended periods of recession. While larger economies were able to endure these, many Southern European nations struggled with the burden of propping up their failing economies, resulting in a series of sovereign debt crises that soon spread economic instability across much of Europe.

In the United Kingdom, the effects of the crisis were far-reaching and particularly severe, due the country being home to one of world's largest global financial centres, the City of London. As the crisis began to unfold, the high level of exposure that the wider economy had to the banking sector, prompted the government to put together a £500bn bank rescue package aimed at bringing about financial stability and restoring public confidence. While the bailout was successful in preventing a complete financial collapse, it did not prevent the country's economy from falling into recession and between Q1 2008 and Q2 2009, the country's GDP fell by 6.3% (ONS, 2016). Unemployment and inflation soon rose, and when the latter was coupled with stagnating wages, it resulted in real income levels declining. While the effects of the recession were significant, a perhaps more notable legacy of the government's decision to bailout the banks, was the significant impact this had on the country's public sector debt level, which soon reached over £1tn (ONS, 2015a). Acknowledging that a debt level of this magnitude was unsustainable, and in light of the significant budget deficit that the government was now running, the new Coalition government determined that it was necessary to implement a series of

public sector spending cuts, marking the beginning of what Prime Minister David Cameron had previously referred to as the “age of austerity” (Cameron, 2009).

2.2.1 The Impact of the Recession on Retail in Britain

While almost all aspects of the British economy were affected by the global financial crisis and subsequent economic downturn, one sector that was particularly hard hit was retailing. Economic data showed that following its onset in late-2007, the retail sector experienced a faster and deeper fall in economic output than the economy as a whole, reaching a peak of 9.3% between Q2 2008 and Q2 2009 (Rhodes, 2015). As a result, between 2008 and 2014, as many as 294 medium and large sized retail firms suffered some form of business failure¹, affecting over 23500 stores and 220,000 members of staff across the country (Centre for Retail Research, 2016). Ultimately, it was estimated that between 2006 and 2012, approximately 10% of all shops in the United Kingdom closed (Bamfield, 2013). In many regards, such impacts were to be expected. Unemployment rose rapidly following the financial crisis and by its peak in late 2011, the number of those out of work was 60% higher than it had been at the beginning of the crisis (ONS, 2015b). Similarly, inflation, which stood at 2.1% at the beginning of the crisis, soon rose to reach a peak of 5.2% in both September 2008 and September 2011 (ONS, 2015c). The result was a significant squeeze on incomes and when combined with uncertainty over the country’s long-term economic stability and the effects of austerity, this led to a drop in consumer confidence that ultimately resulted in several periods of sales contraction between mid-2008 and mid-2013 (ONS, 2015d).

The response of many retail firms to the effects of the recession were unsurprising, with the primary focus being on reducing core business costs and improving margin performance. Strategies included optimising stock-catalogues to focus on better performing lines; reducing logistics costs by improving coordination and efficiency in distribution systems; and investing in IT systems to improve the efficiency of

¹ For the purpose of their analysis, the Centre for Retail Research consider a business failure to be any instance when a firm is required to call in administrators due to ongoing financial difficulties

stock management². While such strategies were ostensibly targeted towards reducing costs and making retail firms more efficient, they also reflected a shift in the power dynamic of retail towards the customer. As levels of retail spending fell, retail firms found themselves needing to improve their offer in order to effectively attract what limited consumer spend there was. As a result, retailers soon began adopting inventive new strategic approaches that not only sought to enhance the retail experience, but also tailor their consumer offer to meet the needs of customers (Retail Think Tank, 2009).

Arguably, the most significant action that retail firms took in order to address financial concerns was to close those stores that were under performing. This was especially true for those firms who had come close to bankruptcy, however, even retailers who had successfully endured the recession found that there was a need to manage the size of their store portfolios more closely, with many choosing to reduce their store footprint and others choosing to scale back or halt store expansion programmes. Of course, this was not a universal response and there were retailers who continued to grow during the downturn. One sector that experienced particularly noticeable growth during this period was 'value' retailing, which saw a net increase of over 1100 stores between 2011 and 2013 (LDC. 2013). This growth generally came at the expense of mid-market firms, who struggled to meet the demands of cost-conscious consumers, who were looking to get more for their money. This was particularly evident in the grocery sector, which witnessed significant fragmentation in consumer behaviour, with both value and high-end grocery retailers seeing substantial growth (McKevitt, 2015)³.

² Further information on these strategies can be found in retailers' annual strategic reports, which are openly published by all public limited companies

³ Between 2010 and 2014 Waitrose opened 86 new stores (John Lewis Partnership, 2010, 2014), while the number of wholly owned M&S Simply Food stores increased by 29 (Marks & Spencer, 2010, 2014)

2.2.2 Digital Consumerism and the Changing Behaviours of Consumers

While evidence clearly showed that the economic downturn was having a profound impact upon retailing, there was a growing belief that a much deeper and more structurally profound change was also taking place, driven by changing consumer behaviours linked to the rise of new digital technologies. While overall sales levels had remained largely stagnant during the downturn, online sales had surged, with the total value of weekly online sales rising from £179.8m in June 2009 (ONS, 2009) to £493.3m in June 2012 (ONS, 2012) and £815.4m in June 2015 (ONS, 2015e). Notably, this increase in online sales was coming at the expense of other sales channels, as evidenced by the fact that between January 2007 and January 2014, online sales as a proportion of total sales rose from 2.7% to 12.8% (Rhodes, 2015).

Evidence of this shift in consumer behaviour was also apparent on the high street, especially as the economy returned to growth. During the recession, the national retail vacancy rate had risen sharply from less than 6% in the second half of 2008 to over 14% by the second half of 2010 (LDC, 2015a). As the economy picked up and as levels of consumer confidence began to rise, it was expected that the vacancy level would begin to fall; however, by the first half of 2015, the national vacancy rate stood at 13%, only down a small amount from its peak and well above the pre-financial crisis rate (LDC, 2015a). Similarly, the number of multiple retail store closures continued to outstrip openings, standing at an average of 14 closures per day in the first half of 2015, for a net loss of 437 shops (LDC, 2015b). While some retail failures were expected given the circumstances, the sheer breadth of many of the failures, and the prolonged timescale over which they were occurring, seemed to indicate that something more profound was going on. Deeper analysis showed that the effects of these changes were not being felt evenly across all retail subsectors. Between 2011 and 2013, the music & video, computer gaming, books and newsagent subsectors experienced a combined 13% loss in store numbers, while women's fashion saw a net loss of over 500 stores (LDC, 2013). Conversely, during the same period, health and beauty services such as hairdressers, nail salons and tattoo parlours saw a net increase of 10.4%, which was equivalent to over 2300 stores (LDC, 2013).

By 2015, a clear pattern was beginning to emerge regarding the shifting dynamics of the retail sector. Evidence showed that there was a pronounced decline in many traditional high street uses, including men's and women's clothing, fashion, building societies, pubs and travel agents. These were in turn being replaced by the growth of non-traditional uses, including charity shops, takeaways, discount stores, coffee shops and bookmakers (LDC, 2014a; 2015b). As many of these uses were considered sub-optimal, this served to re-enforce the perception of many within the media that the British high street was dying (Duncan, 2014; Felsted, 2015; Jeffries, 2013; Johal, 2012), although the reality was a little less hyperbolic. Nevertheless, retail was still undergoing a pronounced structural change, as it adapted to the growth of online retailing.

2.3 Retailing in the Digital Age: From High Streets to iStreets

By the early-2010s, the rapid rise of digital technology and the negative impact that this appeared to be having on Britain's high streets and town centres was a growing subject for debate within the retail industry and the media more generally. While many high street retailers already had a digital presence, the rapid growth of this medium, particularly at a time when retail in general was struggling, thrust the issue into the limelight and raised concerns over the levels of decline that many traditional retailing areas were experiencing. In the early stages of the recession, retailing was impacted by a slowdown in consumer spending and a drop in credit levels, which had the knock-on effect of causing numerous retailers to collapse. This created significant problems for town centres, which were compounded as investment and regeneration schemes halted due to ongoing economic uncertainty. As time progressed, discussion shifted from how high streets could survive this relatively short-term shock, towards the bigger issue of the growing threat of new digital technology, which was fundamentally altering the way consumers behaved.

2.3.1 The Rise of Omni-Channel Retailing

The core issue at this time appeared to be one of competition, with bricks-and-mortar retailers facing not only the traditional geographical aspect of competition, but also a growing number of online-only retailers, who were able to offer a wider selection of goods, lower prices, and the convenience of home shopping and delivery services.

Due to their high operational costs and the spatial limitations of their stores, bricks-and-mortar retailers were unable to compete with online firms on either price or choice. This problem was compounded by the rapid growth of the mobile and tablet market, which provided consumers with access to digital retailing ‘on the go’. While retailers acknowledged the significant challenges that the internet and new technology posed, they also saw significant opportunities. It was not long before many retailers determined that in order to compete effectively with the ‘pure-play’ online retailers, whose sole market was digital consumers, they needed to combine the ease of online or mobile purchasing with the convenience of in-store collection, which negated the need to wait several days for delivery and allowed the customer to collect items at their convenience. By embracing new technology and adapting their business models to provide consumers with the best-of-both-worlds, the feeling was that bricks-and-mortar retailers could “eliminate the cost advantage that pure play internet operators have historically enjoyed” (Dixons Retail, 2014, p7). As a result, in just a few short years, the development of a fully integrated ‘omni-channel’ retail offer became one of the dominant strands of long term strategic planning for most retail firms.

The primary benefit of omni-channel retailing was that it allowed retailers to take advantage of the growing online and mobile markets, but without unduly compromising their position on the high street. Many firms had already determined that consumers who engaged with multiple shopping channels tended to spend more money per transaction than those who shopped solely online or in-store (Halfords, 2009; Kingfisher, 2009; New Look, 2010). To support growth in this area, retailers invested heavily in their distribution, logistics and IT networks, in order to enable them to support not only their regular store deliveries, but also a growing number of online sales that passed through their store network (Arcadia, 2013; Alliance Boots, 2013; H&M, 2012; Halfords, 2010, 2013; John Lewis Partnership, 2012, 2014; Kingfisher, 2013, 2014; New Look, 2014). Several retailers also trialled collection services for third-party sellers in-store (Halfords, 2015; Home Retail Group, 2014, 2015), as well as using online marketplaces to expose their products to a wider digital audience (Halfords, 2015; New Look, 2014, 2015). Another area of significant investment for retailers was in stores themselves, with firms refitting aging stores and implementing new layouts and designs that were more consumer-

friendly (Alliance Boots, 2014; Halfords, 2014, 2015; Kingfisher, 2010, 2011; Marks and Spencer, 2013, 2014; New Look, 2011, 2012; Next, 2010, 2012). Similarly, several retailers explored the potential of so called 'concept' store formats, which emphasised certain themes, styles and product ranges in greater detail (Arcadia, 2013; Halfords, 2012; Kingfisher, 2010; Marks and Spencer, 2013; New Look, 2009, 2013; WHSmith, 2013, 2014). Others trialled the use of 'concession' stores, where one store is located within another (Alliance Boots, 2011; Home Retail Group, 2015; John Lewis Partnership, 2011) or agreed franchise arrangements with third-party operators (Marks and Spencer, 2009; WHSmith, 2013, 2014).

As part of the drive to develop a more rounded and higher quality shopping experience, many firms sought to increase the focus they placed upon in-store and after-sales services, in the form of advice and guidance, installation and setup, or technical support and repairs (Alliance Boots, 2012; Dixons Retail, 2012, 2013; Halfords, 2011, 2012; Home Retail Group, 2011, 2013; Kingfisher, 2011). Some retailers also tried to utilise in-store space more effectively, with a greater emphasis on the use of innovative product displays and digital technology, rather than the traditional practice of simply filling shelves with stock (Dixons Retail, 2013; Home Retail Group, 2012, 2013; Marks and Spencer, 2013). Crucially, throughout their shopping experience, consumers were actively encouraged to engage with a variety of different forms of digital services in order to fully take advantage of what the retailer had to offer, whether this be through the online store, the use of QR codes, blogs and video-sharing sites, or various other forms of social media (Associated British Foods, 2013, 2015; H&M, 2012; Halfords, 2010, 2012; Marks and Spencer, 2010, 2011; New Look, 2013, 2014).

2.3.2 From Expansion to Consolidation: Spatial Strategies in the Digital Era

As retailers increasingly adapted their business structure and offer to meet the demands of consumers in the new digital age, many also adopted growth strategies that emphasised the centrality of omni-channel retailing. Traditionally, retail firms had grown through store expansion programmes, with the emphasis being on expanding market coverage through a greater number of larger stores. However, in the new digital era, this strategy for growth was no longer seen as viable, with the emphasis instead being on optimising store portfolios to provide the widest possible

coverage, but without amassing unnecessary business costs. Retailers sought to reduce the amount of store-catchment overlap they had, optimising store locations to meet the preferences of consumers who were increasingly engaging with digital technology when making purchases. Critically, without the underlying demand from consumers, retailers found it easier to simply close or relocate poor performing stores rather than attempting to turn them round. Consolidation therefore, became the dominant strategy, with store closures, relocations and ‘right-sizes’ commonplace and store expansion programmes being significantly scaled back or stopped altogether (Arcadia, 2014; Dixons Retail, 2012, 2013; Halfords, 2013, 2014; Home Retail Group, 2011, 2012; Kingfisher, 2014, 2015; Marks and Spencer, 2014, 2015; New Look, 2013, 2015; Next, 2015; WHSmith, 2012, 2013). A significant impact of this strategic shift was that retailers became increasingly discerning about where their stores should be located. Retail parks continued to be preferential in many instances, in part due to convenience they provided to the digitally inclined consumer, but also because they afforded the retailer greater flexibility to design stores to their own specifications, as well as being generally more profitable (Dixons Retail, 2012; Home Retail Group, 2009; Marks and Spencer, 2011; Next, 2015). There was also a growth in demand for non-traditional locations such as train-stations, motorway service stations, airports and even inside workplaces, as these locations often benefited from larger catchments, and service provision could be optimised for consumers who wanted to pick up items on their work commute (Home Retail Group, 2015; WHSmith, 2011, 2012).

The overall manner in which many retailers actively embraced new technologically driven retailing reflected a widespread acknowledgement that the “distinction between ‘store’ shopping and ‘online’ shopping [was] becoming increasingly blurred” (Marks and Spencer, 2014, p5). Retailers were ever more aware that today’s consumers were “increasingly likely to use a variety of channels to browse and make comparisons ahead of any purchase” and that a fully integrated omni-channel offer could provide consumers with “convenient, lifestyle-relevant service options of home delivery or collection from a local store” (New Look, 2013, p17). As a result, store design and function were now deemed more important than ever before, with particular emphasis on the need for ‘flexible’ store layouts that could be easily altered and adapted as consumer trends changed. There was also an emphasis on

incorporating digital technology into stores, in order to make shopping across multiple formats as seamless as possible.

The particular significance that this had for the high street was that it now appeared that the era of widespread spatial expansion had ended, with mature, established retailers increasingly seeking to consolidate and optimise their store footprints to support omni-channel retailing. As a result, a new model of retail distribution emerged with retailers having a small number of flagship stores in prime locations, supported by a series of smaller satellite stores that offered a limited sample range, but which were optimised for click-and-collect purchasing (Verdict and SAS, 2011). Whereas at one time a store network of upwards of 250 stores would be required to maintain national coverage, with the rise of new digital platforms, this could now be achieved with fewer than 100 stores if situated in the right locations (Bamfield, 2013). As such, new technology had shattered the notion that a widespread store network was required to support sales growth and, as a result, retail performance was no longer bound up in a need to have an ever-greater presence in towns and cities up and down the country. Instead, retailers increasingly sought to locate stores in optimal locations, which were both convenient for consumers, as well as being profitable for the firms themselves.

2.4 The Challenge of Revitalising Declining Town Centres

The problems facing Britain's high streets and town centres presented a particular challenge for national and local government, at a time when Britain's economy was struggling with the effects of both recession and austerity. Despite the breadth of changes occurring, major retailers agreed that there remained a future for physical retailing; however, the extent to which that included high streets and town centres varied from retailer to retailer. The problem was that high streets and town centres were not offering consumers and retailers what they wanted in the age of digital consumerism and without some form of intervention, it seemed likely that the problem was only going to get worse.

2.4.1 The Portas Review: A New Strategy for Britain's High Streets

Recognising the challenge they faced, the 2010 - 2015 Coalition government decided to commission a series of reports to look into the current and future state of Britain's

high streets, in order to provide a base upon which future government policy could be founded. The first of these was a report entitled *Understanding High Street Performance*, which provided an evidence based overview of the current state of high street retailing in Britain (DBIS, 2011). The report highlighted many of the significant shifts that were occurring in retailing, including the rise of online shopping and the movement of grocery retailers into non-grocery markets. Interestingly, the report suggested that the decline of town centre retail predated the recession and that even during the years of strong economic growth at the beginning of the millennium; retailers were already losing sales and consumers to out-of-town and digital avenues.

The second of these reports and undoubtedly the more significant from the government's perspective was the *Portas Review*, which was commissioned in 2011 to look into the problem of declining high streets and the potential ways that they could be turned around (Portas, 2011). The primary message put forward by the review's author, Mary Portas, was that if high streets were to fight back against the dual threats of out-of-town and online retailing, they needed to go beyond simply serving as spaces for retail activity. Instead, they needed to become social and communal spaces that served as hubs for the local community, all the while creating a sense of place and belonging (Portas, 2011). Portas suggested that the problem of decline on Britain's high streets was largely attributable to their fundamental failure to adapt to the changing nature of retailing or to meet the new expectations of consumers "in terms of value, service, entertainment and experience" (Portas, 2011, p2). As consumers had increasingly shifted towards generalist retailers, specialist retailers, who were more often than not located on the high street, began suffering from a loss of trade. As these firms began to fail, this perpetuated a spiral of decline, whereby each successive failure further weakened the high street offer, in turn pushing the consumer towards alternative retail locations. Agreeing with the DBIS (2011) report, Portas stressed that these were not new issues, instead suggesting that the recent economic downturn had exposed underlying weaknesses in the economy that were perpetuating these problems (Portas, 2011).

In establishing her future vision for high streets and town centres, Portas emphasised that it was pointless dwelling on outside threats and that instead the focus should be

on creating opportunities for growth and promoting innovation. She suggested that the emphasis needed to be on creating 'social capital', positing that once this was achieved, economic capital would follow. Critically, she argued that if high streets and town centres were to be successful, they needed to be more effectively managed, with input coming from a variety of stakeholders and locally tailored responses that met the needs of the local community. The *Portas Review* went on to provide a series of 28 recommendations, which were largely focused on promoting locally driven collaborative partnership, as well as creating town centre environments that were conducive to doing business and attractive to local populations. Particular emphasis was placed upon the potential benefits of creating 'town teams' to manage town centres, with the suggestion being that they could help to "inspire and engage with the public and get people visiting high streets again" (Portas, 2011, p21). Other notable recommendations included a reduction in red tape, more powers for local authority control over the urban environment, support for town-centre-first, less restrictive planning controls, and greater community involvement in the planning process. It was also recommended that a series of pilot schemes be run in order to test ideas put forward in the review, with feedback being used to inform other areas across the country.

2.4.2 The Industry Response to Portas

While the *Portas Review* was generally well received by the government and wider industry bodies, it was noticeable that many of the suggestions it made were not new. In fact, a significant number of the recommendations put forward by Portas had been identified by the previous government, including the need for greater community involvement (DCLG, 2007), the need to diversify town centre uses (DCLG, 2009a), the need for more effective management of town centres (DCLG, 2008) and the need to adopt planning approaches that actively protected the town centre (DCLG, 2009b). Nevertheless, many of the recommendations put forward by Portas mirrored the viewpoints of industry analysts and experts (see for example: ATCM, 2014; Bamfield, 2013; BCSC, 2013; British Retail Consortium, 2009, 2012; Cox et al., 2010; Grimsey et al., 2013; Miller, 2012; Retail Think Tank, 2014; Urban Pollinators, 2011; Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015), who agreed that town centres needed

a clear long term strategic vision, a diversified offer, a more effective local leadership structure and greater community involvement in planning.

Although most industry analysts agreed in principle with the ideas put forward in the *Portas Review*, there were several points of contention. For example, one consideration that was notably omitted by Portas was the need to invest in digital high streets, to help smaller businesses compete in the new digital age. This seemed slightly perplexing given that so many within the retail sector felt that investment in infrastructure and skills should be one of the government's primary objectives (ATCM, 2014; BCSC, 2013; Digital High Streets Advisory Board, 2015; Grimsey et al., 2013). Similarly, there were many who felt that the severity of change within the retail sector was somewhat underplayed in the *Portas Review*. Many industry analysts and experts were more explicit in their belief regarding the seismic nature of change in retail, with the broad consensus being that the retail cores of many town centres would need to shrink significantly from where they were now (Bamfield, 2013; BPF, 2016; Retail Think Tank, 2009; Swinney and Sivaev, 2013).

While the overall tone of the industry towards the *Portas Review* was largely supportive, some reports were more critical. One of the main criticisms levelled at the review was that it was too regressive and fundamentally failed to acknowledge the depth of change that was necessary to turn around town centres:

“... Portas [has] failed to highlight to Government the dramatic structural changes impacting the retail industry through the convergence of changing consumer behaviour driven by technology and that brought about by the prevailing economic conditions” (Grimsey et al., 2013, p3)

Accordingly, the *Portas Review* was deemed to have a “lack of clear analysis about how and why retail was changing” (Morton and Dericks, 2013, p8), resulting in a presumption that the current system was broadly fit-for-purpose, just simply lacking the requisite support to make sure town centres were given the priority they needed. It was also suggested that while the Portas Pilot Towns were a good idea, they were being fundamentally mismanaged with too much focus on short-term events rather than meaningful long-term change (Bamfield, 2013). Arguably, the most divisive aspect of the review related to calls for increased regulatory control of retail

development under the guise of the town-centre-first approach. While many commentators were fully in support of town-centre-first (ATCM, 2011, 2014; BCSC, 2013; British Retail Consortium, 2012), there were others who viewed restrictive regulatory control mechanisms as being part of the problem (Cheshire and Hilber, 2014; Cheshire, Hilber and Kaplanis, 2011, 2014; Morton and Dericks, 2013; Swinney and Sivaev, 2013).

2.4.3 The Government Response to Portas

In March 2012, the government published *High Streets at the Heart of Our Communities*, which set out their response to the recommendations that had been made in the *Portas Review* (DCLG, 2012a). In it, the government accepted many of the recommendations put forward by Portas, although they stressed that these should only be taken as a starting point and that local stakeholders needed to think creatively about how best to address the problems that their local areas were facing. The recommendation to introduce town teams was fully supported, as were measures aimed at supporting local businesses growth, reducing red tape and deregulating the planning system. The report also drew attention to the issue of accessibility in town centres, identifying the need for less prohibitive parking charges and investment in sustainable transport infrastructure. It also suggested that there was a need to give communities a “stronger role in the planning system” (DCLG, 2012a, p21), pointing out that the recently passed Localism Act provided the necessary statutory framework to support a new neighbourhood-planning programme.

One of the particularly noticeable aspects of the government's high street report was its support for town-centre-first in planning, which, it was held, should serve to “direct retail, leisure and office development to town centre locations first” (DCLG, 2012a, p17). This mirrored the position put forward in the new *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF), which also stressed that planners should view town centres as being at the ‘heart’ of local communities and should develop planning approaches that “promote competitive town centre environments” (DCLG, 2012b, p7). In considering how this could be achieved, the NPPF emphasised that there was a need to “ensure that established shops, facilities and services are able to develop and modernise in a way that is sustainable, and retained for the benefit of the community” (DCLG, 2012b, p17). In drawing up local plans, the NPPF indicated

that local planning authorities needed to effectively plan for current and future usage of all town centre functions, as well as setting out “opportunities for development and clear policies on what will or will not be permitted and where” (DCLG, 2012b, p37). It went on to point out that local authorities should work with one another in order to empirically assess “the role and function of town centres and the relationship between them” (DCLG, 2012b, p39), as well as seeking to draw up “a network and hierarchy of centres that is resilient to anticipated future change” (DCLG, 2012b, p7). In considering proposals for new retail developments specifically, the NPPF emphasised that local authorities should look to apply the sequential test, whereby they “require applications for main town centre uses to be located in town centres, then in edge of centre locations and only if suitable sites are not available should out of centre sites be considered” (DCLG, 2012b, p8). If any proposed development failed the sequential test or if it could be deemed that it would have an undue negative impact upon town centre vitality and viability, it should be refused planning permission.

In keeping with their view that local authorities needed to think beyond the *Portas Review*, the government in 2012, released a series of additional documents that sought to draw attention to areas that had been, as of yet, largely overlooked. The first of these was a report entitled *Parades of Shop – Towards an Understanding of Performance & Prospects*, which looked into the current state of neighbourhood shopping provision (DCLG, 2012c). The report emphasised that the significant discussion surrounding the decline of traditional retail areas had tended to focus on town centres and that “neighbourhood level retail and service provision has been given limited attention” (DCLG, 2012c, p3). As a result, the important role that these areas played in contributing to local economic resilience and community cohesion was being significantly “underplayed”. The report subsequently noted that successful neighbourhood parades tended to act as communal hubs, providing non-retail services and social provision in addition to their primary retail functions. The second document released was titled *Re-imagining Urban Spaces to Help Revitalise Our High Streets*, and was aimed at getting local stakeholders to think creatively about “how they design and [use] the spaces in their town centres and high streets” (DCLG, 2012d, p1). The document emphasised that the effective use of shared public spaces could help to create safe, attractive and welcoming environments that “[made] the

high street a destination of choice” (DCLG, 2012d, p2). Describing these spaces as “under-used assets [that] could be enhanced to help revitalise our town centres” (DCLG, 2012d, p6), the report stressed that even “small design changes [could] make a big difference” (DCLG, 2012d, p11), going on to provide several examples of best practice from across the country. During the same period, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills published the *BIS Retail Strategy*, which outlined how the government would work in partnership with the retail sector to support growth (DBIS, 2012). The following year, an updated version was released, titled *A Strategy for Future Retail*, which expanded upon the previous paper, by refining where coordination between the government and the private sector would be needed in order to enable retail to thrive and grow. It emphasised the significance of changes occurring within retail, stressing the importance of effective partnership between the public, private and third-sector interests, and the need to establish a digital future for town centres with a greater ‘experiential’ offer (DBIS, 2013).

2.4.4 Establishing a Long-Term Strategic Vision for High Streets

In 2013, the government published a pair of documents titled *The Future of High Streets* and *The Future of High Streets: Progress Since the Portas Review*, which provided an updated overview of current policy initiatives, lessons and successes from the Portas Pilots, as well as what was to be expected as policy development moved into its next phase (DCLG, 2013a; DCLG, 2013b). In highlighting lessons from the Portas Pilot scheme, it was emphasised that success would be dependent upon finding the right balance between retail and non-retail activities and that “local businesses, residents and councils need to pull together to be able to make a difference to their high street” (DCLG, 2013b, p13). It was also cautioned that despite the fact that much progress had been made by the “volunteers who have come together to create and deliver short-term projects with a ‘just-do-it’ philosophy... there are limitations to relying on this over the longer term” (DCLG, 2013b, p19). In establishing the next steps, it was announced that a new Future High Streets Forum would be established “[bringing] together leaders from retail, property, business, academics, third sector, civil society and government” (DCLG, 2013b, p11). Its aim was to build upon the experiences of the Portas Pilots and seek to “identify ways of tackling some of the key challenges... common to many high

streets around the country” (DCLG, 2013b, p7). The following year, the Future High Streets Forum published their first report, which outlined key lessons that had been learned from a series of study visits to Portas Pilot towns (Future High Streets Forum, 2014).

In December 2013, the government announced its long term strategic vision for how high streets and town centres could be turned around, as well as announcing the latest wave of policy measures that were aimed at helping to achieve this. The central theme of the new strategic vision was on creating town centres that were both business-friendly and economically competitive, as well as being attractive to local communities as places to shop, socialise and engage with cultural and leisure activities. In outlining how this could be achieved, the government suggested that councils needed to be “proactive” and “take control of the future of their town centre, involving all local partners and residents in a conversation about what that should look like” (DCLG, 2013c, p2). They also emphasised that the private sector needed to have a strong voice in this discussion and encouraged the use of collaborative frameworks, such as Business Improvement Districts. Local areas were also challenged to take advantage of the potential opportunities that developing an evening and night-time economy could bring, as well as utilising technology to help modernise high streets and town centres in order to “keep pace with business, visitor and consumer expectations” (DCLG, 2013c, p8).

As part of their new strategic vision, the government once again reiterated their belief that the planning system was too inflexible, which resulted in town centre development being stifled by planning bureaucracy and red tape. Accordingly, the government emphasised their view that local authorities needed to be flexible when it came to the ‘use’ of town centre spaces, arguing that it was not enough to simply encourage local stakeholders to think creatively about how town centre spaces could be used; what was needed was meaningful change (DCLG, 2013c). In accordance with this, several legislative amendments were introduced following a period of consultation, which were aimed at making it easier to alter the use class of shops (A1) to another use, including financial and professional services (A2), restaurants and cafes (A3), assembly and leisure (D2) and dwelling houses (C3) (DCLG, 2014; DCLG, 2015).

By 2015, the government had established a broad policy framework and relevant supporting guidance, which it felt would give local authorities and local stakeholders not only the required tools to bring about change in town centres, but also the necessary flexibility and freedom to achieve this. A core emphasis of this new approach was that local authorities needed to support the creation of places that provided a positive business environment, as well as being attractive to local communities as places to live, work, shop and spend leisure time. It was also emphasised that having high streets that simply functioned around retail activity was no longer viable, and that in order to restore vitality and vibrancy to these areas, they needed to move beyond being seen in simple economic terms. Retail had a role to play, but it could not be the foundation, upon which town centres were anchored. Yet, despite all of this, the government continued to reiterate its support for the principles of town-centre-first, a now dated planning approach, which seemed to bear little relevance to the profound forces of change that were threatening high streets. The inherent contradiction between arguing on the one hand for change and on the other hand for the status quo, seemed to reflect a profound disconnect between their understanding of change in retail and their expectations regarding the future form and function of high streets and town centres.

2.5 Shaping the Town Centres of Tomorrow

During the course of their time in office, the Coalition government made it clear that revitalising town centres and high streets was a core priority for both local authorities and national government, acknowledging that the problems being encountered were largely the result of the profound structural changes the retail sector was undergoing. Accordingly, the government formulated a series of policy responses aimed at addressing this, which it felt would provide local authorities with both the guidance and tools to bring about meaningful change. While many of these policy approaches complemented one another very well and certainly seemed appropriate in light of the government's objectives, the reiteration of guidance that planners should adopt a town-centre-first approach seemed to be somewhat misplaced. The policy, which was carried over from previous guidance, seemed to have little relevance to contemporary challenges and yet it continued to form a central component of planning policy in relation to town centres and retail development.

2.5.1 The Disconnect between Policy and Problem

When town-centre-first was introduced in the mid-1990s, it was targeted at redressing the balance of retail planning policy, so that it actively supported town centres. During the previous two decades, retail decentralisation had profoundly affected the spatial structure of retail in Britain, leaving many high streets and town centres in a state of decline. While market forces were ultimately behind this process, there was a widely held view that it was only because of liberalised planning practices at the time that so much damaging development occurred. Accordingly, when town-centre-first was first introduced, its aims were not to limit out-of-centre development outright, but rather to make sure that when such development did occur, that it was appropriate for the local area and crucially, did not threaten the vitality and viability of town centres.

While support for town-centre-first may appear to be appropriate in light of the challenges facing high streets and town centres today, the reality is that at a time when digital technology is driving change in retailing, town-centre-first is a policy “based on a pre internet era” (Morton and Dericks, 2013, p23). While the decline of town centres today may be manifestly similar to the decline that occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, the forces driving it are decidedly different. Whereas spatial expansion and spatial reorganisation were the dominant strategic trends of retailers in the past, the trend today is towards spatial consolidation. Accordingly, strategic objectives such as widespread spatial expansion and geographical penetration have increasingly been replaced by flexible portfolio management and the need to maintain a physical presence in only the most profitable locations. Given this, town-centre-first is unlikely to be particularly effective, because it has little relevance to the core issues that most town centres are facing. All retailers agree that new digital technologies are changing the way consumers behave, as well as changing the expectations of consumers when it comes to type of shopping experience they expect:

“...digital technologies are dramatically altering the way people communicate, learn, entertain and shop. Traditional retailing in particular is fundamentally changing. Customers continue to shift their shopping habits and most of them interact with digital devices at some point in

their shopping journey. They have come to expect multiple shopping channels, large product choice, low prices and flexible options for obtaining their products, including collection in a local store and home delivery” (Home Retail Group, 2014, p8)

Retailers are under no illusions regarding the significance of these changes, which are held to have “altered the competitive landscape forever” (John Lewis, 2014, p43). As such, in adapting to changing consumer expectations, retail firms are unequivocal that the only way to ensure long term survival is to develop a ‘seamless’ omni-channel offer that not only provides the choice and value of buying online, but also the convenience and efficiency of buying in store. In order to achieve this, many retailers emphasise the importance of maintaining tight control over business costs, including closely managing the size and location of stores. Generally speaking this means that “retailers can no longer rely on opening more space to drive growth”, with the focus instead being on “having an efficient multi channel model that incorporates the optimum number of stores in the right locations with the right cost dynamics” (New Look, 2012, p9).

It is at this point that the ‘disconnect’ between policy and problem becomes apparent. Whereas effective planning today should be focused upon adapting the town centre in response to changes in consumer and retailer behaviour, the primary focus of planning policy continues to be targeted towards restricting out-of-centre retail development. This contradicts the position of many analysts, who suggest that effective retail strategies should be about adapting to how consumers want to shop, rather than prescriptively telling them how to shop (Miller, 2012; Morton and Dericks, 2013). Ironically, the continued support for town-centre-first actually contradicts the government’s own guidance on retail strategy, which cautions that “this is not about the high street versus out-of-town, or the internet” (DBIS, 2013, p10). Not only that, but the government’s own research has shown that in neighbourhood shopping parades, strong local support is often linked to strong local ownership and the general absence of large multiples (DCLG, 2012c). Given that the government believes that long-term viability will be achieved by encouraging a sense of ‘local ownership’ of the high street akin to that of a neighbourhood parade, it appears rather odd to enforce a policy that could potentially have the opposite effect.

2.5.2 Revitalising Town Centres: Is Town-Centre-First Sustainable?

It is clear that the overarching position of retail analysts and experts is that the need to diversify town centres is not a strategic choice, but an unavoidable reality. Such is the scale of change in retailing that it is argued that in the most extreme cases, some town centres may all but disappear as retail destinations (Bamfield, 2013). Accordingly, many commentators emphasise that if town centres are to survive, the focus of strategic responses cannot simply be about retail:

“If we are to put the heart back into our local centres, we cannot do it simply by making shops more competitive or adjusting the planning system in favour of town centres and independent retailers” (Urban Pollinators, 2011, p1)

Instead, the focus should be on diversifying the town centre offer, including an increased amount of residential, office and public services space (Retail Think Tank, 2009, 2014; Swinney and Silvaev, 2013; Urban Pollinators, 2011). In rationalising this approach, proponents point to the fact that consumers no longer have a vested desire to visit town centres when they go shopping, and if they do, they are increasingly drawn to the largest and most attractive centres. Accordingly, it is argued that in order for town centres to survive, revitalisation strategies need to focus on finding alternative ways of getting people into the town centre, including by increasing the residential or working populations:

“...if there is to be a future for the High Street, the principal focus of policy should be to encourage footfall during weekdays as well as weekends. As well as encouraging residential activity in city centres, this should be done through the concentration of employment within the centre of cities” (Swinney and Sivaev, 2013, p23)

The emphasis of much industry analysis, therefore, is that town centres have to try to move beyond their current synonymous relationship with retail. As the government have themselves admitted, retail has a role to play, however, the focus should not be about “[turning] back the clock to a time where the high street was the only place to go” (DCLG, 2013a, p3). As such, the government’s support for town-centre-first is puzzling because, by definition, that is exactly what the policy is seeking to achieve.

Far from diversifying the town centre offer or adapting to changes in consumer demand, town-centre-first primarily acts to reinforce the status quo, impressing upon local authorities the view that retail remains the primary focus of the town centre and that, as such, it should continue to be given the highest priority.

It is worth noting here that the apparent disconnect between policy and problem is not a position that is unique to the government. Many industry experts have also come out in support of town-centre-first (ATCM, 2011, 2014; BCSC, 2013; British Retail Consortium, 2012). However, as these groups tend to have stake in the success of retail in town centres, this is perhaps an unsurprising position. When considering the views of the sector more widely, there is a general indifference to the approach, perhaps reflective of the fact that many no longer see it as relevant, given today's challenges. There are also those who go further, suggesting that town-centre-first does not, nor has it ever really worked (Cheshire and Hilber, 2014; Cheshire, Hilber and Kaplanis, 2011, 2014; Morton and Dericks, 2013; Swinney and Sivaev, 2013). For these commentators, town-centre-first is flawed because it takes decision-making power away from consumers and retailers, and places it in the hands of local authorities, even though the latter may not have the requisite knowledge to make effective decisions:

“[Town-centre-first] is based on the idea that council planners, wiser and better-informed than individual property owners or consumers, can determine the optimal location and sizes of retail sites. Planners can predict the shops needed. Consequently, property rights should be controlled by council planners. These assumptions lead to unrealistic and prescriptive planning. They assume knowledge of the future, they assume that change should be guided by councils, not by consumers.” (Morton and Dericks, 2013, p47)

In this sense, town-centre-first forces retailers to operate in a manner that is not conducive to either their own or the customers' best interests, meaning that both groups end up losing out. Evidence shows that out-of-centre stores are more profitable when compared with town centre operations (CBRE, 2012), while retailers hold that consumers prefer out-of-town shopping because it offers a “greater breadth

of choice in products and shopping formats that fit around customers' differing needs and busy lifestyles" (Marks and Spencer, 2008, p11). As such, by acting against the market and preventing retailers from selecting optimal sites, town-centre-first actually leads to higher costs, less convenience and poorer choice for consumers:

"There are a number of obvious adverse consequences of forcing retailing into small and often awkward sites in 'town centres': these locations will be less convenient for suburban shoppers (an ever growing share of the population) and the smaller stores will, compared to large format out-of-town stores, be able to offer less variety, at higher prices (Cheshire and Hilber, 2014, para. 4)

One of the main criticisms of town-centre-first in this regard, is that it is not truly evidence-based. Many commentators have noted that there is a lack of reliable data on town centre performance and other associated metrics (Astbury and Thurstain-Goodwin, 2014; ATCM, 2011; Retail Think Tank, 2009; Swinney and Sivaev, 2013) and what data there is, tends to be expensive and therefore not readily available to planners (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015). Accordingly, it has been suggested that one of the main obstacles in decision making today is "the lack of empirical evidence at an extent to which we can confidently implement policy and guidelines" (Astbury and Thurstain-Goodwin, 2014, para. 5.1). What this means in reality, is that decision making in regard of retail development is largely 'hypothetical', often being based upon "an exaggerated fear of what might happen, rather than an informed view of what actually does happen when such schemes are developed" (Retail Think Tank, 2009, p30). This view certainly seems to chime with that of retailers, many of whom have themselves expressed frustration with the obstinate approach of some local authorities:

"In our dealing with local councils it is noticeable that some are much more pro-growth and pro-jobs than others. Many local councils are enthusiastic and efficient; but a few remain an unhealthy mix of Luddite intransigence and incompetence. Going forward, in areas where councils traditionally have got away with just saying "no", we will be more active

in harnessing the law and the full weight of public opinion to campaign for growth” (Next, 2013, p7)

While many of these criticisms are dismissed by advocates, what is clear is that there are those who feel that town-centre-first has failed, often because the policy has been implemented poorly. Town-centre-first is supposed to apply to all main town centre uses, yet it has only ever really been enforced in relation to retail. As a result, many towns have experienced considerable ‘decentralisation’ of jobs, which has not only reduced the size of the catchment market, but also “left their central economies more reliant on retail” (Swinney and Sivaev, 2013, p22). Given this, many have questioned why we continue to expect people to use town centres “when the rationale for people visiting them... has been removed” (Findlay and Sparks, 2014, p14). Whatever the case, the overriding view of most critics is that effective policy should not be about restricting development outside of the town centre, but rather about promoting growth within:

“Policy should not be about restricting choice. Instead of looking to create barriers to growth elsewhere in a city, which could reduce overall investment in a city, it should look to remove barriers to growth in city centres for the benefit of the city economy overall” (Swinney and Sivaev, 2013, p35)

Accordingly, many critics feel that town-centre-first should be scrapped or significantly amended, because, as it currently stands, it is not creating sustainable outcomes (Cheshire and Hilber, 2014; Morton and Dericks, 201; Swinney and Sivaev, 2013).

2.6 The Need for Research: Why is Town-Centre-First so Pervasive?

Evidence presented in this chapter has identified the existence of a disconnection between the decline of Britain's town centres, and the nature of contemporary retail planning policy, which is broadly structured around the town-centre-first approach. While the potential long-term impacts of such a policy position are unclear, wider sectoral evidence would suggest that it has the potential to cause more harm than good, as it may obscure from local authorities the importance of moving away from

retail towards a more diversified town centre offer. The reasoning for this disconnect is not clear, although it has been suggested that a lack of reliable information relating to retail performance in town centres is likely to inhibit effective decision-making. As a result, this has become a core focus of research over recent years (Dolega and Celinska-Janowicz, 2015; Dolega, Pavlis and Singleton, 2016; Singleton et al., 2016; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011). However, there remains a distinct lack of research focussing on the human side of this decision making process and, in particular, the behavioural factors that fundamentally influence the formulation of retail planning policy and strategy. If reliable data has been lacking, as it has been suggested, it follows that there must be other reasons why planning continues to hold that town-centre-first is the most appropriate response today.

It is here, therefore, that this research project seeks to contribute, not only by identifying the various forces that influence the decision-making behaviours of planners, but also through a consideration of why these forces influence retail planning in the way they do. In short, this research will seek to answer the question of why: why do planners continue to hold that town-centre-first remains the most appropriate response to tackling the decline of Britain's town and city centres? In doing so, it will seek to offer an insight into planners' decision-making, ascertaining why they make decisions as they do and considering what the factors influence this process. In considering the potential for research in this area, it is important to bear-in-mind that national planning guidance is exactly that: guidance. As such, it is inherently flexible, with local authorities being encouraged to tailor responses to the unique challenges they are facing in their local areas. As such, the ultimate impact of adopting a town-centre-first strategy will largely depend upon the way in which local planning authorities incorporate it into their overall strategic approaches. While generalised trends may be apparent at a national level, the ultimate effectiveness of town-centre-first will be dependent upon the unique contextual circumstances in which the policy and strategy are not only formulated, but also implemented. Accordingly, any research in this area will need to focus on the local authority level, as it is here where the practical strategic decisions that shape our towns and cities are made.

3 METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK AND DATA SOURCES

3.1 Introduction

It is clear from evidence provided in the preceding chapter that there exists a disconnect between the contemporary processes of change within retail and the predominant emphasis of retail planning policy, which holds that local authorities should look to enforce the principles of town-centre-first. Accordingly, it has been determined that in order to understand why planning continues to adhere to these principles, it is first necessary to understand how contemporary retail planning strategies are being formulated and the considerations that influence this process. The following chapter sets out the contribution that this research project seeks to make in this area by considering both the objectives of the research, as well as the proposed manner in which this will be achieved. The chapter begins by considering the overarching research aims of the project and the specific questions it will seek to answer (section 3.2), before moving on to consider the most appropriate methodological approach to achieving this (section 3.3). It will then move on to discuss the specific stages of this process, starting first with the historical analysis (section 3.4), before moving onto the primary research phase (sections 3.5 and 3.6). The chapter concludes with a consideration of the actual process of conducting the primary research, as well as the process of sorting, classifying and analysing the data (section 3.7).

3.2 Project Aims and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research project is to identify and examine the factors that influence the formulation of contemporary local authority retail planning strategies in England and to assess the extent to which historically pervasive influences continue to dominate strategic decision making in planning. The purpose of this is to help explain why planners continue to hold that town-centre-first should remain a central component of contemporary planning strategies aimed at both protecting and revitalising declining town and city centres. As sectoral evidence would seem to suggest that such an approach is no longer suitable in light of the changing dynamics of retail today, this issue is particularly relevant, as the long-term success of contemporary revitalisation and regeneration strategies arguably hinges upon local authorities adopting a strategic response that is germane to the challenges being faced.

In order to achieve this objective, a series of research aims and questions have been identified, which serve as a foundation upon which the research methodology of this project has been constructed. In total, three research aims have been set, each of which has a series of subsidiary research questions that this research project will seek to answer. The first aim serves to establish the historical context of how retail planning has operated in the past, including identifying any pervasive influences that may be relevant to understanding the behaviours of planners today. The second aim serves to explore the contemporary practice of planning for retail development, including identifying the various considerations that influence the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies. The final aim draws together the findings of aims one and two, in order to identify the extent to which historically pervasive influences continue to affect decision making today, as well as identifying any other influences that may be relevant to understanding the decision-making behaviour of planners.

<p>Aim One – To understand the historical evolution of retail planning policy and strategy in England, and to evaluate the extent to which retail planning exhibits evidence of path dependence</p>
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The first aim seeks to establish the historical context of decision-making in retail planning, in order to identify any commonalities in the way in which this process has occurred over time. In doing so, it will identify the historically omnipresent influences over retail planning, which will subsequently be assessed to determine whether they provide evidence of path dependence. In order to achieve this aim, the research project will seek to answer the following questions:

- What are the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning and how have these changed over time?
- How has the practice of retail planning evolved in England since the end of the Second World War and what forces have shaped it during this time?
- What have been the primary pervading influences over planners and the practice of planning for retail development throughout history?
- To what extent does retail planning exhibit evidence of path dependence?

Aim Two – To determine how local planning authorities understand the contemporary process of retail decline and to establish the extent to which contemporary retail planning strategies are being formulated in response to this process

The second aim seeks to determine how planners understand the processes of change in retail today, as well as the extent to which contemporary retail planning strategies are being formulated in response to these processes of change. In doing so, it will establish whether planners share a common understanding of contemporary processes of change, both with each other, as well as with wider stakeholders in retail. At the same time, it will also establish the extent to which the contemporary forces of change in retail serve as an influence in the formulation of present day retail planning strategies. In order to achieve this aim, the research project will seek to answer the following questions:

- What evidence of retail decline is being seen by planners in their local area and what factors have been identified as being the likely causes of this?
- To what extent are local retail-planning strategies being specifically formulated to respond to the challenge of retail decline?
- How do these views compare with private sector stakeholders operating within the local area, as well as with wider sectoral practice?

Aim Three – To identify the primary influences of contemporary retail planning strategies and to consider the extent to which historically pervasive influences continue to impact upon decision making in retail planning today

The final aim seeks to bring together the findings of aims one and two in order to identify and establish the primary influences of contemporary retail planning strategies. In doing so, it will illustrate the relative importance of differing historical and contemporary influences in strategic decision making, as well identifying any more nebulous influencing factors, which may be relevant to understanding the decision making behaviours of planners. In this sense, not only will it seek to explore the evidently explicit influences of retail planning, but it will also consider the broader manner in which the behavioural disposition and psychological mindset of planners may influence the decisions they make. By considering how various influences relate to the wider contextual circumstances in which planning takes place, it will ultimately seek to provide an explanation for the disconnect between local retail planning strategies and wider evidence regarding the likely future form and function of retail environments. In order to achieve this aim, the research project will seek to answer the following questions:

- What are the main influences of contemporary retail planning strategies and to what extent do these strategies exhibit evidence of path dependence?
- What evidence is there, that other more nebulous factors influence the decision-making behaviours of planners?
- How can these influences be understood in relation to the wider contextual circumstances in which planning takes place?
- To what extent can these influences explain the disconnect between local retail planning strategies and wider evidence regarding the likely future form and function of retail environments and town centres?

3.3 Developing a Methodological Framework

Given the stated aims of this research project and the nature of the research questions that it is seeking to answer, it follows that the most logical approach to conducting this study is to utilise a qualitative research methodology. While there is no singular definition of what constitutes qualitative research, at its broadest level, qualitative

research is concerned with trying to ‘elucidate’ knowledge from both human environments and human experiences, within a variety of different conceptual frameworks (Winchester, 2005). In this regard, it can be argued that one of the main objectives of qualitative research is to try to provide ‘social explanations’ to ‘intellectual puzzles’ (Mason, 1996). At this point it is important to bear-in-mind that qualitative research “does not represent a unified set of techniques or philosophies”, but has rather “grown out of a wide range of intellectual and disciplinary traditions” (Mason, 1996, p3). In this sense, there is no prescriptively right or wrong way of conducting qualitative research; instead, the emphasis should be on tailoring an approach that will most effectively enable any research project to achieve its stated aims.

3.3.1 Establishing Historical Context

While the primary focus of this research project is on understanding the contemporary practice of retail planning, it is important to acknowledge that “any contemporary issue is bound intrinsically with the social and historical milieu of the past” (Lundy, 2008, p395). In this sense, in addition to understanding the contemporary context in which decision-making in planning occurs, it is also important to establish the historical context in which decisions have been made in the past, because the decisions of today are by extension influenced by the past:

“Most social scientists would agree now that individual behavior is shaped by broader social, economic, political, and physical factors that interact with psychological characteristics in specific place and time. To understand these broader factors, which are influential in the present, it is important to know how they evolved and what shaped them” (Schensui, 2008, p392)

In this sense, a critical analysis of historical context can be used to establish and “examine those factors that have, over time, contributed to current situations” (Schensui, 2008, p392). In most instances, historical research is usually associated with the practice of historiography, which is a research method that seeks to look beyond historical data itself to establish “theoretical and holistic conclusions about historical events and periods” (Lundy, 2008, p396). In this sense, historiographies are

normally concerned with historical interpretations and representations of the past, rather than the past itself (Andrews, 2008). While it is true to say that this research project is seeking to develop a holistic understanding of those omnipresent influences over retail planning in this past, it is not seeking to critically interrogate the interpretations and representations of the past, as would often be the case in historiographical analysis. In this regard, it would be incorrect to suggest that this research project is seeking to perform a historiography of the literature on retail planning; rather it is seeking to re-evaluate critically the contextual circumstances in which the historical practice of planning for retail development has been understood. The purpose of such an endeavour is to enable strands of pervasive historical influence over planning behaviour to be identified, such that they can be used to determine the likely extent to which decision making in retail planning has become path dependent.

3.3.2 Defining the Scope of Primary Research

The first consideration in developing a robust methodological framework for the primary research phase is to determine the ultimate scope of the research being conducted. As the primary objective of this research is in trying to understand the factors that influence decision-making in planning, it is considered that it will be more beneficial to have a small amount of 'deep' information, rather than a large amount of 'shallow' information. Similarly, as the contextual circumstances of decision making in planning are likely to vary significantly across the country, it makes sense for the research project to be geographically focussed in one area. This way, the broader social, political and economic circumstances in which the development of planning strategies are occurring, will be broadly the same for all respondents.

For these reasons, it has been determined that conducting a spatially defined case study represents the most appropriate methodological approach for this project, one for which there is a clear precedent in geographical research (Mason, 1996). There are numerous different definitions of what case study research actually is (Hay, 2004; Woodside, 2010; Yin, 1994), although no matter the definition, the emphasis is always on case study research being about seeking to gain a deep understanding of a specific person, place, group, topic, issue or process. For this reason, case study

research frequently utilises in-depth interviews as a way of probing for a deeper understanding of why individuals or groups make decisions or complete processes in the way they do. While case study research can, and often does, involve “multiple research approaches across multiple time periods” (Woodside, 2010, p6), this sort of long-term approach is unrealistic for this project. In circumstances when utilising a long-term approach is not appropriate or not possible, it is pertinent to consider other sources where relevant data can be obtained (Woodside, 2010). Accordingly, in addition to the detailed historical analysis that will be conducted in advance of the primary research phase, this research project will also draw upon relevant primary documentary evidence, as a complement to the interviews that are conducted.

Admittedly, case study research is not without its limitations, foremost among which is the generalisability of its findings. This should not be considered an issue for the most part, however, because most case study research is concerned with probing the theoretical basis upon which actions or decisions are made, rather than seeking to find a series of definitive and replicable findings (Hay, 2004; Woodside, 2010; Yin, 1994). As planning practice is a highly context dependent activity, it is anticipated that this research project’s findings would have little value in being generalised to the wider population, instead being of greater value to existing theoretical and conceptual ideas. However, this does not mean that the findings of this research should be considered as idiosyncratic and relevant only to the specific case being studied. Rather it means that any generalisability of this research to the wider population will come about by it helping to understand how the decision making process in planning is influenced by factors that extend far beyond the simple black-and-white considerations evident in planning policy and guidance.

3.3.3 Primary Data Collection Method 1: In Depth Interviews

The primary objective of this research project is to identify and examine the factors that influence the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies in England, in order to help explain the pervasiveness of town-centre-first. In this sense, this research project is seeking to identify not only the tangible considerations that influence planning strategies, but also the more enigmatic factors that can influence the decision-making of planners, such as their emotional state of mind or the behavioural norms that shape the way they think. Given this, it has been determined

that performing in-depth interviews with a variety of respondents will be the most appropriate data collection technique, as this will not only allow for extensive discussion of relevant material, but will also provide a substantial body of data suitable for 'interpretative' analysis. Interviewing, as a research technique, is particularly useful and effective when seeking to gain an insight into differing meanings, opinions and motivations in the decision making process (Dunn, 2005). By comparison, closed-questioning techniques such as surveys or questionnaires would be less effective because their standardised form would provide little insight into the important 'how' or 'why' questions that this research is seeking to answer. Another strength of using interviews is that they give the respondent, rather than the researcher, scope to define what it is that is important in the context of discussing any topic, as well as allowing for tentative conclusions and interpretations to be checked, verified and scrutinised (Dunn, 2005).

3.3.4 Primary Data Collection Method 2: Documentary Analysis

While in-depth interviews form the primary focus of data collection, it is important to bear-in-mind that there will always be limitations to the breadth of information that can be accrued via this method. As such, it is important to consider whether the research project can benefit from incorporating additional data from documentary sources. In the context of this research, it would be short sighted to overlook the potential value of reviewing the extensive body of local authority policy documentation that has relevance to this project. For this reason, it has been determined that supplementing the interviews with contemporary documentary analysis will enable the research project to frame the interview responses within the wider contemporary planning context, which will not only add meaning to responses, but will also allow for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the issues that respondents are dealing with.

3.4 The Historical Context of Retail Planning

As has previously been noted, any attempt to understand the contemporary decision-making behaviours of planners without first considering the manner in which retail planning practice has evolved in the past, would be to overlook those historically pervasive influences that continue to define and influence the way decisions are

made today. Accordingly, the first half of this thesis is devoted to examining and exploring the evolution of retail planning in England, framed against a backdrop of the wider social, political and economic changes that have occurred during this time. In doing so, it will provide a critical examination of those omnipresent historical influences over retail planning, in order to determine the extent to which retail planning exhibits evidence of path dependence.

The importance of understanding the historical context in which processes of institutional change occur, or in which policies or strategies are initiated and implemented, is now well established within the social sciences (Amin, 1999; Barnes, Gartland and Stack, 2004; Collier and Collier, 1991; Evenhuis, 2017; Gains, John and Stoker, 2005; Greener, 2002; Hall and Taylor, 1994; Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney and Thelen, 2009; March and Olsen, 1984, 1989; Martin and Sunley, 2006; North, 1990; Peters, Pierre and King, 2005; Pierson, 2000, 2004; Thelen, 2004; Wood and Valler, 2001). In many regards, this reflects the growing influence of ‘New Institutionalism’, as a framework for understanding how ‘institutions’ shape the behaviours of individuals, organisations and governments. Institutions, in this sense, refers to “the formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy” (Hall, 1986, p19), and differs from organisations, which refer to groups of individuals and the governance arrangements that are used to coordinate their actions (North, 1990). While much research in this area has tended to focus on economics, sociology and political science, many of its concepts have begun to permeate into other research disciplines, including two that are relevant to this research project: path dependence and historical institutionalism.

3.4.1 History Matters: The Growing Influence of Path Dependence

One of the most notable ideas to have emerged out of New Institutionalism is the concept of path dependence. While there is no singular, unified definition of what path dependence is, a process can be considered path dependent if “initial moves in one direction elicit further moves in that same direction” such that “the trajectory of change up to a certain point constrains the trajectory after that point” (Kay, 2005, p553). In this sense “once a given path has been laid, each subsequent decision is at least influenced by, and probably reinforces, what has gone before” (Greener, 2002),

such that, over time, a strong status-quo inertia is established, which acts to discourage change (Barnes, Gartland and Stack, 2004). Broadly speaking, path dependent processes are both confined and shaped by institutionalised rules, routines and procedures and, in turn, have a profound impact upon the operations and practices of the organisations in which they occur (Hall and Taylor, 1986; March and Olsen, 1989). It has been pointed out that the lack of a clear and concise definition of path dependence has resulted in it frequently being conceptualised in rather more simplistic terms to mean that ‘history matters’ (Mahoney, 2000); however, the concept can be seen to have a far greater depth, which can help elicit how and why institutional arrangements and organisational structures develop as they do.

The concept of path dependence is generally regarded as having first emerged within new institutional economics, most prominently in research that sought to explain why technological inefficiencies pervaded for so long, even when there were more efficient alternatives available (Arthur, 1989, 1990; Cohen, 1990, 1996; David, 1985). The most commonly cited example of this is the QWERTY keyboard, which despite not being the most efficient keyboard layout quickly became ‘locked-in’, as the industry standard (David, 1985). In explaining why this was the case, economists suggested that the economic principle of increasing returns acted to inhibit change that would otherwise be preferable, because the relative ‘payoff’ for each subsequent user increased the more prevalent it became (Arthur, 1994). In this sense, once an initial advantage was established, positive feedback acted to ‘lock-in’ the technology, even if a more efficient competing device existed (Pierson, 2000). The concept of path dependence quickly spread to other areas of economic inquiry, including to processes of institutional emergence and change (North, 1990; Scherrer, 2005) and the spatial location of production (Arthur, 1994; Krugman, 1991).

Path dependence has since become influential in other academic disciplines, most notably as part of the study of New Institutionalism in sociology and political science. Much research in this area has sought to understand why the decisions taken when an institution or policy is formed, continue to have a defining influence into the future (Collier and Collier, 1991; Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). Unlike in economics, where the scope for change is limited only by economic viability, in politics and society, institutional arrangements tend to be much harder to change

(Collier and Collier, 1991; Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000). In the context of political science, where it has become particularly popular, “path dependency captures the tendency for a policy step in one direction to encourage the next step to be in a similar direction” such that “once defined the development of policy tends to follow the underlying assumptions, sense of direction and the coalition of interests that accompanied its launch” (Gains, John and Stoker, 2005, p27). Similarly, from an institutional perspective, path dependence serves as a means of explaining behavioural lock-in, wherein certain behaviours become so firmly embedded that they establish a powerful status-quo inertia that discourages subsequent behavioural change (Barnes, Gartland and Stack, 2004).

While it is clear that path dependence has become an increasingly popular concept in understanding the pervasiveness of specific institutions or behaviours in the social sciences, it remains the case that the concept is itself ill defined, and thus liable to considerable interpretation. In seeking to provide some clarification in this area, Mahoney (2000) has defined two dominant types of path dependent sequence: self-reinforcing sequences and reactive sequences. Self-reinforcing sequences are characterised by the formulation and long-term reproduction of specific institutional patterns, which can be seen to exhibit increasing returns. Self-reinforcing or ‘positive feedback’ sequences were first suggested by Pierson (2000), who felt that they provided a viable explanation for the tendency in politics for steps in one direction to induce further steps in the same direction. Under the principles of increasing returns, the relative benefits of a current activity or policy increase over time, such that costs of changing it become increasingly prohibitive. As a result, once adopted, these institutions become difficult to transform, even if more-efficient options are available. According to Pierson, because the benefits of the existing position increase over time, early events that act to reinforce such a position matter more than later events. Reactive sequences, by comparison, refer to chains of temporally ordered and causally related events, in which each step in the chain is dependent upon past steps. Reactive sequences can only be considered path dependent if there exists inherent sequentiality, such that each future event in the chain is contingent upon preceding events.

At this point, it is worth noting that the concept of path dependence is not without its critics. For example, Kay (2005) has suggested that while path dependency can serve as a useful organising concept that can be used to label certain types of temporal process, its lack of theoretical base means that it too often lacks the necessary conditions to explain adequately that which it labels. In this sense, even if a process or policy is labelled as path dependent, in many instances, such an assertion will still require theorising. Kay goes on to suggest that simply identifying continuity or lack of change over time is not enough to infer path dependence, what is needed instead is to identify ‘constrained’ change, in which that which did not happen, could not have happened, because of an earlier sequence of decisions (Kay, 2005). Similarly, it has been suggested that a weakness with path dependence stems from its relative ambiguity regarding how exactly a ‘path’ is defined and “what it is to be on the path and what it is to be off path” (Gains, John and Stocker, 2005, p28). What both of these criticisms have in common is that rather than taking aim at the essential premise underlying path dependence, they instead focus on its lack of theoretical and conceptual development, which is something that will need to be considered carefully if this research project is to robustly achieve its stated aims.

3.4.2 Historical Institutionalism and Path Dependence

One area of research with which path dependence has become particularly associated is ‘Historical Institutionalism’, which was identified by Hall and Taylor (1996) as one of three distinct branches that make up the study of New Institutionalism, along with Rational-Choice Institutionalism and Sociological Institutionalism. Historical Institutionalism argues that, as individuals act within specific institutional arrangements that are historically rooted, in order to understand the present structure and functioning of such institutions, one first has to understand the historical perspective (Kay, 2005). In this sense, it is interested in the creation, persistence and change of institutions over time and is particularly popular, as a way to understand continuity and change in public policy (Hall and Taylor, 1996, Mahoney and Thalen, 2009; Pierson, 2004; Thalen 2004).

Within the context of Historical Institutionalism, policymaking and political change are seen to be discrete rather than continuous processes and, as such, go through extended periods of stability that are defined as path dependent (Peters, Pierre and

King, 2005). This conceptualisation has helped to explain how dominant political projects such as the welfare state have been able to pervade for so long. According to Peters, Pierre and King (2005), such projects end up becoming ‘institutionalised’ as a set of pervasive ideas, which become harder to change over time and in some instances, actually end up outliving their utility. According to this view, new institutions are only formed at specific points in history known as ‘critical junctures’, which represent periods of significant change, usually triggered by external forces (Collier and Collier, 1991). During these critical junctures, change is far less constrained than during periods of path dependence, as existing institutional structures are no longer able to provide adequate solutions to current issues and therefore opportunities arise for new institutional structures to emerge (Cappocia and Kelemen, 2007; Katznelson, 2003).

While the punctuated equilibrium model of stability between periods of critical juncture has become well established within Historical Institutionalism, an alternative view has emerged that focuses on the patterns and processes of gradual institutional change. Under this premise, it is not pronounced external shocks that serve as catalysts for change, but rather the continuous workings of internal power relations (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009). In this sense, institutions should not be viewed as being inherently ‘static’, but rather as being routinely contested. In these situations, it has been suggested that path dependence should not be taken to mean that certain institutions become locked-in, as is contended under the increasing returns hypothesis, but rather that continuity is a result of those who benefit from a current institutional arrangement, mobilising their power in order to protect such an advantage (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009). In such a system, the positive feedback effect that helps to establish continuity emerges “when a particular policy helps to generate a political coalition that works towards the continuation of the policy” (Sorensen, 2015, p21) and, as such, it is not that policy is resistant to change, but rather that there is concerted effort not to change it. Change under this premise can be seen to occur when there is sufficient variability in the way rules, practices and procedures are implemented, or when there is insufficient enforcement of compliance, such that new institutional arrangements are able to form gradually over time (Mahoney and Thenen, 2009).

The emergence of the gradual institutional change theory can be seen as a response to the perceived shortcomings of existing views of path dependence. Several authors (Gains, John and Stocker, 2005; Mahoney and Thelen, 2009) have noted that the gradual change hypothesis offers an alternative to the limiting presumption of increasing returns, because it provides a viable alternative explanation for real world evidence. For example, Gains, John and Stoker (2005) argue that the presumption of increasing returns can only explain path dependence in situations when there is little scope for change. They suggest, however, that path dependence can equally be found in situations when there are strong calls for change, which they contend can be explained by the fact that certain institutions are inherently designed to reproduce themselves. In this sense, an institution is not resistant to change due to increasing returns, but rather because the institution and those who benefit from it, use their power to maintain it. While criticisms such as these do require thought to be given the exact manner in which the concept is applied, it is equally argued that for all of its shortcomings, path dependency still has significant value simply in forcing us to consider both causality and temporality as important variables in shaping the direction in which institutions and organisations move (Booth, 2011).

3.4.3 Path Dependence and Planning

While the majority of research that has utilised path dependence has tended to come from the disciplines of economics, sociology and political science, the concept is being increasingly used within research in planning. It has previously been argued that historical analysis should be considered an important methodological approach in planning research (Abbot and Adler, 1989) and while there is an extensive body of historical planning literature, much of this has tended to adopt a ‘narrative’ driven approach, which has “limited the ability of planning historians... to offer clear and resonant interpretations of longer-term directions and trends in planning (Ward, Freestone and Silver, 2011, p245). In recent years, however, there has been an increase in the amount of historically and comparatively focused research, which has sought to provide a deeper conceptual insight into the processes of continuity and change in planning (see for example: Booth, 2011; Bunker, 2012; Couch, Sykes and Borstinghaus, 2011; Sorensen, 2015). Central to this research has been an acceptance that planning policies and processes need to be understood as being both context and

path dependent. In simple terms, because planning policies and strategies are formulated in response to temporally and spatially specific urban and social problems, and because they are developed within operationally unique institutional structures and arrangements, to fail to consider such ‘contextual circumstances’ is to fail to properly explore the forces that shape and mould them. In this regard, the inherent attraction of path dependence comes from the fact that it offers a “rational way of interpreting historical phenomena and explaining the influence of past events” (Booth, 2011, p20).

In considering the use of path dependence in research in planning, it is therefore necessary to consider how the concept can be specifically tailored, such that it provides both an empirically and theoretically grounded explanation for the pervasiveness of certain policies, practices and beliefs. A good starting point for this relates to the question of what exactly the ‘institutions’ are that are of interest in planning. As was noted earlier, in their broadest sense, institutions can be defined as “the formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating practices that structure the relationship between individuals in various units of the polity and economy” (Hall, 1986, p19). While such a definition serves as a useful way of conceptualising institutions in general, it has been suggested that given the variety of differing areas of study in which institutions and path dependence are considered, it may be more appropriate to tailor a unique definition, which is relevant to the specific area being studied (Immergut, 1998). In line with this, Sorensen (2015) has established a narrower definition that relates specifically to planning, which defines institutions as “collectively enforced expectations with respect to the creation, management, and use of urban space” (Sorensen, 2015, p20). In this sense, the institutions that are of interest in planning, do not just encompass the legal framework and regulatory mechanisms through which planning operates, but also the institutionalised behaviours and relationships that have been shaped, as it has evolved over time.

From a conceptual standpoint, a similar question needs to be asked regarding which theoretical explanations of path dependence, and processes of continuity and change, are applicable in the planning context. In line with Kay’s (2005) suggestion that research involving path dependency needs to deepen its theoretical and empirical

understanding of the historical dynamics in which policy development occurs, several different theorisations of how path dependence can be understood have been reviewed. This has included several differing explanations for why path dependence occurs, including increasing returns, self-reproduction and reactive-sequencing, as well as two different models of how the process of change can be seen to occur: the punctuated equilibrium model and gradual institutional change. While focussing specifically on just one or a few of these theoretical ideas would be an appropriate approach to take, it is contended that given the scope of this research project and given the fact that there is little existing literature in this area, it is better to adopt a more exploratory position, where all of these theoretical and conceptual explanations are considered as potentially valid. In this sense, rather than seeking to establish empirically whether any specific theoretical explanation is more applicable in the context of retail planning, the aim of what follows is to allow the historical evidence to speak for itself. Such an approach is considered appropriate, because the way planning operates is particularly conducive to there being multiple differing explanations:

“while the overarching rules of the game may have been set in a past critical juncture, that does not mean that the system is frozen or entirely predictable until the next major change, as implementation and compliance with existing rules may be contested, and (re)interpretations of the rules may allow openings for creativity, or even outcomes that are quite the opposite of the intended application of the rules” (Sorensen, 2015, p31).

In this sense, the inherent contradiction between formalised legal frameworks and centralised guidance and policy on the one hand, and locally and regionally tailored strategies that emphasise flexibility and adaptability on the other, creates a unique environment in which multiple theoretical explanations for path dependence are likely to exist.

3.4.4 Conducting a Historical Analysis of Retail Planning

In order to achieve its intended aim in this regard, the historical analysis of retail planning in England will be required to draw from a wide range of academic sources,

including various sub-disciplinary areas of study in geography, planning, politics and retailing. While the majority of sources used will be secondary; on issues relating specifically to retail planning, primary documentary sources will be consulted. The purpose of this will be to add an additional layer of critical insight into the role of planning guidance, as an influence over planning behaviour, framed against not only the circumstances of the time, but also the longer historical evolution of retail planning in Britain. In other words, various iterative forms of planning guidance will be interpreted against both the wider contextual circumstances that existed at the time they were produced, as well as their subsequent position within the historical evolution of retail planning as a whole.

The analysis of historical literature will serve an important role within this research project both in establishing the historical context of retail planning, as well as serving as a means to determine the extent to which retail planning has become path dependent. For this reason, the analysis of this literature will comprise of two distinct, albeit interlinked components. In the first instance, the historical analysis will be woven into a linear narrative examining the evolution of retail planning from the initial origins of town planning up until the present day. This will then be followed up by a deeper exploration of how the practice of retail planning has changed over time, through which those pervasive influences that have fundamentally shaped the decision-making behaviours of planners will be identified.

3.5 Selecting a Suitable Case Study Location

Upon completion of the historical analysis, the research project will then move on to the primary research phase. As has previously been noted, the relevance of this project's findings to the wider population are limited and, as such, there is no need to select a case study location based upon whether it serves as an effective proxy for the wider population. Instead, given the specific research focus, it is pertinent to select a location that accords closely to the traditional spatial distribution of retail, as it is these locations, that are most threatened from the changing dynamics of retail today. Much of our understanding of how retail spaces develop in relation to one another and the wider consumer population is grounded in spatially defined models such as Central Place Theory or Reilly's Law of Retail Gravitation. Central to most of these models is the concept of the retail hierarchy, which establishes a pattern of

interlinked retail centres, which have a ‘diminishing’ retail provision, as one travels away from the central core. Given this, it is advisable that any research case study area should have at its heart a retail centre of the highest order and should then be approximately lined up with and incorporate all surrounding areas that fall into the catchment of this core centre. In addition to this, it would also be beneficial for the case study area to have a variety of different retail centre types, as retail planning policies are principally built around these. This would ideally include a wide array of both hierarchically (e.g. town, district and local centres) and non-hierarchically (e.g. retail parks, outlet malls) defined centres.

3.5.1 Selecting a Suitable Research Area

Utilising the Venuescore UK Shopping Venue Rankings produced by Javelin Group for 2014/15, 22 major city-centre retail destinations can be identified in the United Kingdom (Javelin Group, 2015). Removing those retail centres located in either Scotland or Northern Ireland (which have their own unique planning systems) and removing those located in London (which as a global city would provide a unique set of data) leaves 16 potential locations. This can be further trimmed to five, by removing all but the remaining highest ranked destinations (Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham, Liverpool and Brighton). As all of these destinations have been classified by Venuescore as being approximate to one another in terms of market position (upper middle), fashion position (fashion forward) and age position (mid), it can be determined that any of them would be a suitable candidate to be selected as the centre of a case study area.

In order to select the most appropriate research area, it is therefore necessary to consider other factors. According to the Local Data Company, the North West of England has been among the worst affected regions by the shift in retailer and consumer behaviours over the last several years, with the region experiencing a net loss of 195 stores operated by multiple retailers in 2014 and 2015 (LDC, 2016). In addition to this, the North West also had the highest vacancy level in the country in the first half of 2014, both in terms of town centres (19.3% against a national average of 13.4%) and retail parks (11.2% against a national average of 8.1%) (LDC, 2014b). Given this, a decision was taken to further narrow the pool of potential candidates

down to just Liverpool and Manchester, as these are both located in the North West of England.

At this stage, it was determined that the final decision would need to be made with regard to considerations that went beyond statistical data. Of particular note here was the pipeline of ongoing and proposed retail developments which were occurring in the wider Liverpool region, which had only relatively recently seen the opening of Liverpool ONE: a 42-acre, £1bn, retail-led, mixed use redevelopment of the city centre that added over 170,000 sq metres of retail and leisure floor space (Littlefield, 2009). Notable ongoing or proposed retail developments in the wider Liverpool region included the development of the new Liverpool Shopping Park, which when completed would provide 65,000 sq metres of retail and leisure space (The Derwent Group, 2016); the redevelopment of the New Mersey Shopping Park; the redevelopment of the Junction 9 Retail Park; an expansion to the Cheshire Oaks Designer Outlet Village; the proposed redevelopment of Kirkby town centre; and the Northgate Scheme in Chester.

Another consideration that lent support to the Liverpool city-region being an appropriate location for this research project was the considerable variance in performance levels between its best and worst performing retail centres. For example, the wider Liverpool region has examples of very strong performance in some centres, including Liverpool ONE (ranked 11th nationally among shopping centres), Cheshire Oaks (ranked 1st nationally among outlet malls) and the New Mersey Retail Park (ranked 9th nationally among retail parks) (Javelin Group, 2015). Conversely, several locations within the wider Liverpool region have been frequently identified and highlighted in the media as suffering from particularly acute levels of decline including Birkenhead, Bootle, Ellesmere Port, Runcorn, Skelmersdale and Southport (Barrett, 2014; Butler, 2014; McDonough, 2013; Murphy and Miller, 2016; Norbury, 2014). The experience of Liverpool would seem to chime with wider sectoral evidence, which suggests that in today's technologically inclined retail sector, the strongest locations are getting stronger, while the weakest locations are getting weaker. For this reason, along with the other factors cited above, Liverpool was ultimately selected as the preferred research location for this research project.

3.5.2 Establishing Research Area Boundaries

In establishing the outer boundaries for the research area, the most obvious solution would be to use the boundaries of a pre-existing geographical subdivision, such as Merseyside or the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. However, demarcating the edge of the research area in this way would not be appropriate, as it is widely acknowledged that the influence of major urban centres often extends far beyond such boundaries (Centre for Cities, 2010). In the case of Liverpool, a 2011 report authored by The RT Hon. Lord Michael Heseltine and Sir Terry Leahy, suggested that the zone of economic influence of Liverpool could be seen to extend considerably further than the boundaries established by the Liverpool City Region:

“At its core, the Merseyside conurbation, and what is now called Liverpool City Region, has a population of around 1.5 million, centred on the City of Liverpool. However... the economic region is bigger, including areas of population dispersal such as Skelmersdale and Winsford, and important Merseyside industrial towns such as Ellesmere Port” (Heseltine and Leahy, 2011, p19)

In effect, what this report suggested was that while local governance and the provision of public services are delineated by set boundaries, economic activity is not constrained in such terms, meaning that the zone of economic influence of a large city such as Liverpool can extend far beyond statutory boundaries. Heseltine and Leahy (2011) contend that in order to determine the true extent of the economic influence of Liverpool, it is necessary to consider a wide variety of factors:

“The extent of the region can be observed through such things as the catchment areas of the city centre shops, and of specialist health and education facilities, the circulation area of the regional daily newspapers and location of listeners to local radio stations, the spread of the Merseytravel train network and travel to work flows, the spread of housing markets, and the areas served by sports, entertainment and cultural facilities. These variously delineate an urban region centred on Liverpool that spreads from Wrexham and Flintshire to Chester,

Warrington, West Lancashire and across to Southport” (Heseltine and Leahy, 2011, p20)

Given this assertion and in consideration of the various factors relevant to this research project, it has been determined that it is appropriate to adopt a case study area that is centred on Liverpool and which extends to cover the local authorities of Wirral, Sefton, Knowsley, St. Helens, Halton, Warrington, Cheshire West and Chester, and West Lancashire. This factors in considerations not only relating to the economic influence outlined above, but also road⁴, rail⁵ and bus⁶ links, as well as historic ties⁷. The decision to use local authority boundaries as the final demarcation point has been taken because this research is concerned with planning matters and local planning authorities in England operate at an authority-wide level. In reality, the true extent of the zone of influence for Liverpool’s retail core is likely to be either slightly closer or further away than the boundaries of the peripheral local authorities; however, using such boundaries would not be appropriate given the planning focus of this research project.

3.6 Identifying Data Sources and Selecting Participants

The final stage in developing the research methodology for this project is to identify documentary data sources relevant to the case study area, as well as selecting suitable research participants to take part in the interviews. As has previously been noted, while in-depth interviews form the primary method of data collection for this

⁴ The Geographers A-Z Map Company includes towns from the Wirral, Sefton, Knowsley, St. Helens, Halton, Warrington, Cheshire West and Chester and West Lancashire in its Merseyside Edition

⁵ The Merseyrail Network extends to, and has stations located within the local authorities of Sefton, West Lancashire, Knowsley, Wirral and Cheshire West and Chester, while there are also direct rail services to Liverpool from Halton, St. Helens and Warrington.

⁶ Local bus services provided by Arriva North-West and Stagecoach provide links to towns in the Wirral, Sefton, Knowsley, St. Helens, Halton, Warrington, Cheshire West and Chester and West Lancashire

⁷ A significant proportion of Liverpool’s population has in the past, been relocated into the neighbouring settlements of Skelmersdale (West Lancashire), Runcorn (Halton) and Warrington (Warrington), as part of the New Towns programme.

research project, these will be supplemented with documentary analysis in order to help bridge the gap between the already reviewed national level evidence and the more locally-specific contextual information that will emerge from the interview phase of this project.

3.6.1 Documentary Analysis: Identifying and Selecting Suitable Data Sources

As part of the primary research phase, it has been determined that it will be necessary to consult locally developed retail planning policy, in order to gain a clearer perspective regarding current strategic approaches at the local level. In most instances, local retail planning policy and strategy is available as part of local authority development plans. The *National Planning Policy Framework* (NPPF) stipulates that local authorities must produce a Local Plan for their area, which should be used to establish their strategic priorities, including the “provision of retail, leisure and other commercial development” (DCLG, 2012, p38). Within the Local Plan, local authorities are required to establish policies that help to promote ‘competitive town centres’ and, as part of this process, they are expected to define a network and hierarchy of centres within their local area. In addition, they are also expected to establish clear boundaries for their shopping areas, as well as setting out what new retail development will be allowed and where. In this regard, the Local Plan is expected to establish a clear spatial pathway for retail development, the implementation of which will be supported by additional policy measures, including the sequential test and impact assessment.

In the period since the NPPF was published, many local authorities have been in an extended transition period, as they slowly replace the policy framework established in their Unitary Development Plans with the new Local Plan. For this reason, different local authorities are at different stages in the developmental process and many have more than one document that currently contains relevant policy information. In the context of this research project, the policy framework that will become part of the new Local Plan is of particular interest. Some local authorities have already adopted the first-stage of their Local Plan, usually referred to as the Core Strategy, whereas with others, the Local Plan remains in draft form. Nevertheless, as it is the most up-to-date information that is desired, formally published drafts will be considered an acceptable source of data, as the core

emphasis of the policies established within them is unlikely to change before they are formally adopted.

3.6.2 In-Depth Interviews: Identifying and Selecting Suitable Participants

The act of selecting participants for interviews is an important process. Unlike in quantitative research, where random or representative sampling is commonly used in order to achieve objectivity and enable replicability of data, in qualitative research the emphasis is on understanding a specific action or process and, as such, it is critical that the correct participants are selected, such that they can provide the required insight into what is being studied (Longhurst, 2003). In order for this research project to be successful in its aims, it is necessary to make sure that, not only are all participants actively engaged with the retail planning system, but that they also provide a wide range of viewpoints, to prevent the results from becoming skewed in favour of one particular position. By incorporating the responses of a wide array of actors into the research study, it has been determined that a more accurate insight into the decision making process can be garnered, as well as a clearer identification of the important factors that influence this. In light of this and after careful consideration of the manner in which many retail developments occur, it has been determined that there should be representatives of not only the public sector (approx 50%), but also the private sector (approx 25%) and public-private sphere (approx 25%).

While it is primarily planners who determine what forms of retail development are allowed and where, it would be naive to assume that there are not other actors who influence the decision making process. Local and national politicians, community groups, investors, property developers, investment boards, retailers, independent shopkeepers, architects, land and property owners and consumers all influence the manner in which planning decisions are made. However, given the focus of the research project and given resource constraints, it would not be feasible to incorporate the viewpoints of all of these groups. Instead, a decision has been made to focus on those groups who it is felt are the most likely to actively engage with the planning system during the development of new retail spaces: local authority planners (public), property developers (private) and local economic investment boards (public-private).

3.6.3 In-Depth Interviews: Structure and Content

In considering interviews as a research method, there are no fixed rules regarding how they should be carried out, nor are there any rules governing what types of questions should be asked. In fact, depending upon what is being researched, there will often be a need to find a balance between asking simple factual questions and more nuanced ones designed to elicit a more thoughtful or emotional response (Longhurst, 2003). For the purpose of this research, it has been determined that semi-structured interviews will provide the most effective technique, as they will help to keep the focus of discussion on the important aspect of how the decision making process occurs, but without inhibiting the natural flow of the conversation (Dunn, 2005). This approach can also be seen to be appropriate in light of the differing backgrounds of the interview respondents, as the use of a prescriptive interview structure would likely be problematic. In practice, adopting a semi-structured interview approach means that the discussion is focused around several key ‘themes’, with the line of questioning being tailored depending upon whether the respondent represents a local authority, a private company or an investment board. In accordance with this, it is often considered useful to produce an interview guide in advance of the interviews, which lists the key topics and questions to be addressed, but without establishing a prescriptive template for the interview itself. This guide includes a series of prompt questions that can be used to draw the line of discussion back onto the required topics, for those situations when it would otherwise be hard to do in the course of normal conversation.

In developing an interview guide for this project, four key thematic areas have been identified: current challenges and issues being faced; policy responses and local retail-planning strategy; the role and function of high streets and town centres; and the justification of policy and action. These themes are designed to allow for a clearer understanding of how different groups are responding to the challenges they are facing and it is felt that by following a linear path of discussion, from the identification of a problem, through responses and towards a subsequent justification, it will be more clearly evident how and where external influences are permeating into and impacting upon the development of local authority retail planning strategies.

The first theme will address the current challenges that exist within built retail environments and how these are manifesting themselves for the different respondents. Discussion here will focus on the challenges themselves, as well as their potential causes, with particular focus given to how a distinction can be drawn between those issues that are indicative of weaknesses in the local economy and those issues that are down to wider sectoral changes. The second and third themes are somewhat related and focus upon the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies within the local area and the relevant considerations that influence this. Initially, this discussion will focus on the formulation of long-term strategy and policy, to determine why such a strategic approach is considered appropriate to the local area. The conversation will then move onto discussing the development of smaller scale, more focussed regeneration and investment initiatives, primarily in relation to high streets and town centres, and the practical considerations that are made here. Discussion here will focus upon the working relationship between public and private sector stakeholders, as well as how the remit of these groups is defined and delineated. The final theme addresses how the formulation of contemporary strategies for retail are rationalised and justified, based upon evidence of change within the retail sector and given the practical limitations within which both the public and private sectors are working. The primary focus here is to determine the extent to which factors not directly related to retail decline act as an influence in strategy formation, as well as to ascertain whether there are other, more veiled influences at play.

3.7 Conducting the Research

The first phase of data collection involves reviewing and extracting relevant information from documentary sources, both to serve as discursive material in the interviews and to provide context to the more specific responses that respondents will give. This took a period of approximately two weeks to complete, during which time the interview schedule was finalised. Following on from the completion of this, the interviews were conducted over a period of 8 weeks.

3.7.1 Contacting Participants and Conducting the Interviews

Utilising a 50-25-25 split of participants, as outlined previously, and wanting to keep the research at a manageable size, it was decided that the target would be to interview 12 participants in total, with six of these being representatives of local planning authorities. In accordance with this, six of the nine local authorities from within the case study area were randomly selected and contacted regarding their participation in the study. Four of the initial six accepted the request, while two declined, so these were replaced with two more from the remaining three authorities, both of whom accepted. The same process of selection was used for the property developers and investment boards: a random sample of three were selected and subsequently contacted from a wider pool. All three of the initially contacted property developers accepted, while two of three initially contacted economic investment boards also accepted. A further five investment boards were contacted, but no further participants were forthcoming, leaving this group short by one. Consideration was given to adding an additional participant in the form of a local authority or property developer, but this was ultimately rejected in order to keep the respondents as balanced as possible.

As part of the process of contacting participants, a preliminary identification was made of who within each organisation may be a suitable interview candidate. Each organisation was free to alter this as they saw fit, as long as the nominated participant was actively involved in the process of planning for retail development. Once an interviewee was identified and agreed to take part, they were informed of what the interview would involve and what was required on their part. Participants were also given the choice of where the interviews took place: at their place of work, at the University or at a neutral public venue. Ten of the interviews were subsequently conducted at the participant's place of work, with one interview being conducted at the University. The average length of each interview was 62 minutes. In order to enable a more detailed analysis to be performed later, all of the interviews were recorded and stored in accordance with University regulations. A decision was also taken in advance of the interviews that they would be entirely anonymised, in order that participants be able to speak freely. While nothing inherently controversial or personal was discussed during the interviews, it was felt best to avoid any form of

identification that could be potentially problematic for any of the participants or organisations they represent.

3.7.2 Processing, Sorting and Analysing the Data

Once all of the interviews had been completed, the process of preparing the data for analysis began. The analysis of the data represented the final stage of the research project and involved a detailed cross-examination against wider historical, contemporary and theoretical information, in order to identify those relevant factors that influence the development of contemporary retail planning strategies. While there are many different ways in which qualitative data can be analysed (Mason, 1996), given the aims of this research project, it was determined that a combination of literal and interpretative analysis would provide the most effective analytical approach. Literal analysis would enable the findings to be presented at face value, showing the explicit factors that planners consider when they develop planning strategies, which could in turn be compared to other stakeholders and wider sectoral evidence. Interpretative analysis could then be used to delve beyond these literal statements, allowing for the identification of less obvious influences interwoven within the broader historical and contemporary contextual circumstances in which planning decisions are made.

In order to aid in the process of data analysis, it was decided that it would be beneficial to sort and index the data, both to enable the identification of pervasive topics or themes and to standardise the data that was gathered during each interview. In many ways, this was necessary because the interviews were semi-structured and therefore, the ordering of responses and the way in which key topics were discussed was not uniform. It was also felt that by indexing the data it would be easier to identify those factors of particular relevance to the respondents. In developing a series of indexing categories, it was decided to base these upon the four key themes that had been previously identified. This meant that at their broadest, the responses were classified according to one of four key indexing categories:

- *Current Challenges and Causes* – responses relating to the key challenges being faced and how these are understood
- *Strategic Responses* – responses relating to the development of long term retail strategies and the factors that influence this process

- *Strategy Implementation* – responses relating to the implementation of short term regeneration and investment strategies
- *Strategy Justification* – responses relating to how strategies are justified in light of wider circumstances

Each of these four indexing categories was further sub-indexed according to the more nuanced nature of the responses. Once the data had been processed and indexed, the final consideration was whether a specific analytical framework would be used in order to analyse the data. Several were considered at this time, however, it was ultimately decided that it would be overly limiting to focus on a singular analytical framework, given the broad ranging themes that had emerged from the data collected. As such, it was instead decided that the analysis would draw from a variety of different theoretical approaches, including historical institutionalism, path dependence, risk perception, and behavioural psychology.

3.8 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to provide a detailed overview of the methodological framework that was developed for the research project, including a justification of the methodological approach, data sources and location of research. Accordingly, it has been shown that given this research project's stated aims, it was necessary to adopt a two-stage piece of research, initially focussed upon conducting an historical analysis of retail planning in England, before moving on to consider the manner in which contemporary retail planning strategies are formulated. It was also shown that a spatially-defined case study approach, consisting of both in-depth interviews and documentary analysis, provided the most effective way of gathering relevant primary data; data which could then be cross-analysed against broader historical and contemporary contextual information to identify and elucidate those key influences in the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies.

4 THE ORIGINS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF RETAIL PLANNING

4.1 Introduction

Planning for retail development in England has a long and complex history that can be traced back to the very origins of town planning, during the early decades of the 20th century. Over the course of more than a century, changes in society, the economy, urban spaces and the political environment have helped to shape our understanding of the role and function of retail spaces, which have in turn shaped the nature of retail planning policy. The following chapter explores this process of change, by considering how the practice of retail planning came to be and how its theoretical foundations were shaped by various academic advancements during the early and mid-20th century. The chapter begins with a brief overview of how the retail planning system in England operates today (section 4.2), before considering the 19th century origins of town planning and how this evolved into a unifying planning ideal in the decades following the end of Second World War (section 4.3). The chapter then explores the theoretical foundations that came to underpin retail planning at this time, starting with the earliest attempts to model and understand urban form, before considering the influence that spatial science and positivism had during the middle part of the 20th century (section 4.4).

4.2 The Retail Planning System in England

In simplistic terms, retail planning is a method of regulatory control by the public sector on the operation of the retail system, principally with the objective of protecting 'public interest'. The actual definition of what constitutes public interest is open for debate, but as retail firms would normally be expected to self-regulate themselves in economic terms, it is usually inferred that public interest relates to non-market related factors (Guy, 2007). In reality, a wide array of economic, social, and environmental factors can be considered to be in the public interest, ranging from issues of accessibility and exclusion through to the protection of the historic environment. One of the fundamental functions of retail planning, therefore, is to balance these considerations, not only against one another, but also against wider economic considerations that are fundamentally at the forefront of what drives the retail system as a whole.

From an operational standpoint, retail planning in the England occurs largely at the local level, with decisions regarding proposals for new development being decided upon by local authority planning committees. While the final decision regarding an application lies with the councillors who make up these committees, most decisions will be taken in accordance with the recommendations of planning officers who work for the local authority, and who will have performed a detailed assessment of the likely impacts of any proposed development. The only time that the decision making process defers to the national level is in instances of appeal, when the proposal will be passed onto an independent inspector, who will make the decision in accordance with the most up-to-date government policy. Since the early-1990s, local authority development plans have been the primary determinant when assessing a proposal, with the plans themselves having been developed in accordance with centrally published government guidance. However, most decisions will factor in 'material considerations', which refer to other factors that are considered pertinent to the proposed development or its location, but which are not directly addressed within the development plan. The structuring of the system in this way helps to coordinate local authority actions with the broader objectives of central government, but without compromising the flexibility of local decision-making.

When the retail planning system in England is compared with the systems used in North America and Western Europe it can be determined that the English system is, in principle, considerably more flexible, because the development plan is only one factor in the decision-making process and is therefore not absolute. As other material considerations are factored into the decision making process, the English system can be seen to be more ad-hoc, with each application assessed on a case-by-case basis. From a legal standpoint, the English system is also highly powerful because landowners have few legal rights beyond those afforded in much broader human rights legislation (Grant, 1992). As planning appeals are not heard through the courts, but rather are referred to planning inspectors, there is very little legal protection of individual property rights. While an applicant can legally seek to overturn a planning decision through the courts, this is uncommon, unless it can be shown that the decision taken was in contravention of planning law.

Understanding why this model of retail planning has come to exist in England requires an examination of its historical evolution. While the statutory origins of retail planning can be traced back to the end of the Second World War, the origins of town planning practice go back much further. At the same time, the influences on retail planning extend far beyond the legislative framework in which it operates. As such, in order to understand effectively the operation and implementation of retail planning today, it is first necessary to consider both the ideological origins of town planning in Britain and the theoretical and conceptual ideas that have influenced our understanding of urban spaces and retail environments.

4.3 The Origins of Town Planning in Britain

The history of planning in Britain is complex and one that has been shaped by a variety of different social, economic and political forces. While planning has been a mechanism of the state for much of its existence, its ideological origins date back to the work of industrial philanthropists during the 19th century, with it generally being accepted that town planning, as an intellectual and professional movement, emerged as a reaction to the social ills that pervaded at this time (Hall, 1996). The industrial revolution marked a pivotal moment in British history, paving the way for a profound shift in the British economy, which evolved from one driven by mercantilism to one driven by capitalism. While this shift led to considerable benefits

for the powerful elite, it also precipitated rapid growth in Britain's towns and cities, which resulted in acute housing shortages, overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions.

Beginning in the early-19th century, industrial philanthropists became concerned with the living and working conditions of their employees, which were seen to have declined since the onset of the industrial revolution. In proposing an alternative approach, many philanthropists emphasised the need for better housing, increased wages and a greater focus upon education (Owen, 1813). The development of New Lanark in the late-18th century represented one of the first examples of a planned urban settlement, which subsequently inspired the development of numerous other 'model villages' during the 19th century. While the development of model urban villages based upon the ideals of social reformers may not have had the desired impact upon the factory slums of major towns and cities, they did stimulate wider discussion regarding the morality and economic necessity of improved living conditions (Pacione, 2009). One individual who was inspired by the work of early social reformers was Ebenezer Howard, who in 1898 founded the Garden City movement. Howard railed against the problem of overcrowding in towns and cities, suggesting that there was a need to develop a new kind of town, which incorporated the best of both urban and rural life (Howard, 1898).

In many regards, the actual practice of town planning in Britain began with the public health and housing policies that emerged towards the end of the 19th century. At the time, there was a growing recognition that many of the health and social issues that plagued towns and cities could only be addressed if the poor quality design and structure of urban spaces was first improved (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006). The earliest planning acts in Britain focussed heavily on housing and, despite their objectives, were widely criticised for failing to provide local authorities with any meaningful powers that would enable them to control development (Ashworth, 1954; Cherry, 1974; Minett, 1974; Ward, 1974). Calls for significant planning reform were soon being voiced against a backdrop of increasing economic instability and the government soon acknowledged that there was now a need for some form of "co-ordinated and planned intervention in the economic and social life of the country" (Ward, 1974, p688).

By the latter years of the Second World War, a broad consensus began to emerge between the major political parties that the state needed to take greater control over the economic and social life of the country, in order for the emerging 'planning ideal' to be achieved. Despite their traditionally polarised viewpoints, both major parties agreed that a much more centralised mechanism of planning would be required, given the massive scope of change that was envisioned for towns and cities (Marwick, 1964). The criticality of this consensus became evident in the aftermath of the War, as the political stability it afforded provided the perfect platform upon which the emerging planning ideal could flourish.

In developing a new planning framework, the government decided that rather than starting anew, it would incorporate many of the workable elements from previous acts into a new mechanism, allowing them to focus on rectifying identified problems in the pre-war planning system (Amos, 1987; Gunby, 1987; Heap, 1950). In 1947, the government passed into law a new statutory framework for planning in Britain, the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947. At its heart was a fundamental shift in planning, whereby the right to develop land was effectively 'nationalised' (Black, 1951; Booth, 2002; Davies, 1998; De Smith, 1948). The new act also provided local authorities with new compulsory purchase powers and powers to protect buildings of significant architectural or historic value, as well as introducing the requirement for local authorities to produce a comprehensive development plan for their local area (MTCP, 1947a). By the early-1950s, confidence in planning was on the rise, with clear political and public support in the idea that through planning, Britain could be rebuilt 'better' than before; providing new towns; protecting rural areas; redeveloping and reconstructing towns and cities; and turning 'amorphous' neighbourhoods into socially vibrant communities with high quality housing and more amenities (Cherry, 1996).

4.4 The Theoretical Foundations of Retail Planning

While the origins of town planning in Britain can be traced back to 19th century industrial philanthropists, the theoretical foundations of retail planning spread much wider, drawing from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds, including geography, sociology, economics and physics. For much of its early life, the study of geography was based upon the principle of environmental determinism, which held

that human development was fundamentally influenced by the physical environment. In this sense, it was believed that the characteristics of people across the globe were intrinsically tied to environmental factors such as altitude and terrain (Lewthwaite, 1966). By the 19th century, the study of geography was heavily focused upon identifying unifying and distinguishing principles that differentiated regions from one another. This 'regional geography' was particularly concerned with descriptions of cultural and physical landscapes, as well as the interconnectedness of the human and natural environments.

Early approaches to geographical inquiry were criticised for their largely descriptive nature and the fact that they made little in the way of meaningful contribution to the pressing social issues of urban life in Britain. Outside of geography, however, there were observers who were keen to understand the nature of urban environments and, in particular, the way in which capitalist forces were acting to shape and order the physical and social structures of the city. Arguably, the most notable of these was the German philosopher Friedrich Engels, who provided a detailed description of the social conditions of industrial towns in Victorian England, arguing that the industrial revolution was resulting in poorer living conditions for many working class communities. In assessing the social structure of Manchester, Engels described a broadly concentric pattern of development with an unpopulated core, surrounded by a 'girdle' of the working class and the wealthier upper classes beyond (Engels, 1844).

4.4.1 Human Ecology and Early Socio-Spatial Models of Land Use

At the turn of the 20th century, a new branch of academic inquiry emerged, which was concerned with trying to understand the social and spatial development of urban settlements. Drawing influence from social Darwinism, this movement sought to apply established scientific theories from the natural sciences to the human world, in order to understand how and why urban settlements developed as they did. Referred to as human ecology, this body of thought, likened society to an organism where each part was 'symbiotically' related to the others in a web of relations, which were fundamentally based around competition and competitive behaviour (Park, Burgess and McKenzie, 1925). Interestingly, despite the fact that towns and cities had been important centres of human activity for several thousand years, the study of urbanism

and urban form was largely sidelined in geography and, as such, it fell to urban sociologists to pioneer the study of the socio-spatial structure of urban environments.

In 1924, Ernest W. Burgess published what would become one of the seminal contributions to the early study of urbanism, when he adapted the ideas that were central to human ecology and applied them to the urban environment. In developing a socio-spatial model of Chicago, Burgess was able to show that the sorting behaviours of human ecology resulted in a broadly concentric 'zonal' model of urban development, with the structure of the city conforming to the socio-economic characteristics of the population (Burgess, 1924, 1927). In Burgess's model, poor immigrant and racially excluded communities lived in the zone just outside the central business district (CBD), while the wealthiest individuals lived in the suburban periphery. The intermediate area was home to more settled, predominantly white, working-class communities who had sufficient social mobility to leave the inner city. For Burgess, these zones reflected the differing levels of economic power that these groups had and through a process of competitive bidding, wealthier groups were able to acquire the land that was most in accordance with their needs. As cities grew, new industrial and commercial uses sought to locate within the CBD, ultimately pushing its boundaries outwards. The new job opportunities this growth created led to an influx of new migrants who took the lowest paid jobs and resided in the poorest inner city areas. What followed was a cascading effect, where the existing residential groups all moved up the socio-economic ladder, acquiring better jobs and moving outwards from the centre.

Burgess's model soon came in for criticism, particularly from those who felt the model was not empirically accurate. In 1939, economist Homer Hoyt adapted the concentric zonal structure of the Burgess model into a 'sectoral' spatial arrangement, which he held better reflected the true structure of cities (Hoyt, 1939). For Hoyt, Burgess's model was flawed because when it was empirically tested, land values often varied more within each concentric zone than between them. The reason for this, he contended, was that cities developed along the arterial routes that ran into the CBD, meaning that a city's urban structure was better characterised by sectors than by concentric zones. Notably, however, Hoyt's model did not seek to replace Burgess's, rather it sought to extend it by adding the direction in which development

occurred to the already existing and correct assumption of distance based ordering. The modelling of urban structure was furthered still in 1945, when Harris and Ullman (1945), developed their 'Multiple Nuclei Model', which was predicated on the belief that cities did not grow around a single CBD, but rather around multiple separate 'nuclei'. One of the main strengths of the multiple nuclei model was that it accounted for the multi-centred growth of urban environments, as well as for variations in land-use that were the result of locally specific contextual circumstances. Among the other notable early attempts to model the internal spatial structure of cities were Proudfoot (1937a), Canoyer, (1946) and Ratcliff (1949).

While many agreed with the economic principles that underpinned Burgess's model, there were those, who felt its overt focus on economic influences was flawed (Firey, 1947). One particularly vocal critic was Gideon Sjoberg, who argued that Burgess was universalising the American experience. For Sjoberg, the Burgess model and its various iterations were only applicable to industrial, capitalist societies and had little relevance to pre-industrial towns or agrarian societies (Sjoberg, 1960). This was because Burgess's model was based upon a society where production and commerce were the drivers of economic growth and where the capitalist elite were afforded the highest place in society. Sjoberg argued that in pre-industrial society, power resided with administrative and religious leaders and, as such, money was not the primary determinant of social standing. In developing his model of pre-industrial urban form, Sjoberg determined that the socio-spatial structure of non-industrial societies was the opposite of the model proposed by Burgess, with the elite preferring to be close to the administrative, political and religious institutions that located in the centre of urban settlements. Around this exclusive, high status core, lower classes lived in distinct socio-economic clusters, often aligned to specific crafts or guilds, while the peripheral regions of the town were home to the poorest and most marginalised groups.

The extensive body of work that emerged in response to Burgess's original model, stands as a testament to its legacy within the study of urban environments. Notably, this influence extended to the emerging practice of town planning, which was particularly interested in the idea of an idealised urban form. For town planners, early models such as these reinforced their belief that structure and order were natural

characteristics of urban settlements and that accordingly, good planning should look to adhere to these principles.

4.4.2 Walter Christaller and Central Place Theory

Around the same time that urban sociologists were seeking to understand the *intra-urban* development of urban settlements, a small group of German economic geographers were focused upon trying to understand the *inter-urban* development of urban settlements. These studies were particularly concerned with understanding the economics of location and unlike the ecologically grounded studies of the Chicago School, sought to understand the regional development of urban settlements through economic analysis. As towns and cities developed as places of trade and commerce, it followed that their spatial pattern across regions should conform to basic economic principles. Interestingly, despite this economic imperative, the roots of this approach actually lay in the work of American rural sociologists, who during the early-20th century, sought to understand the spatial relationship between urban and rural areas (Galpin, 1915; Kolb, 1923; Kolb and Polsen, 1933). Building upon the work of these earlier sociologists, this school of economic geographers sought to explain the pattern of urban settlements within what were essentially agricultural regions and for many, this endeavour was part of a broader desire to identify unifying ‘laws’ that governed the number, size and location of urban environments.

Arguably, the most notable contributor in this area was the German geographer Walter Christaller, who in 1933 published *Central Places in Southern Germany*, in which he offered a theoretical explanation for settlement pattern based upon market activity. For Christaller, the spatial arrangement of urban settlements was essentially determined by the retail market, with towns and cities serving as ‘central places’, where consumers and producers would come together to buy and sell goods (Christaller, 1966). Central to this view was Christaller’s belief that there existed an interdependence between central places and their surrounding ‘hinterlands’, whereby the “chief profession, or chief characteristic, of a town is to be the center of a region” (1966, p116). While Christaller did acknowledge that settlements could develop where the primary function was not related to market activities (e.g. mining towns or harbours), he held that most settlements developed to serve the role and function of a central place.

In order to develop a workable theoretical model, Christaller made a series of economic and spatial assumptions, including that: (1) the buying and selling of goods was the primary function of central places (2) both consumers and producers were concerned with maximising utility (3) the region was uniformly populated and had uniform levels of income and demand (4) transport was possible in all directions with the only variable in transport costs being the distance travelled (5) the principle of distance decay impacted upon both consumer and retailer behaviours (6) the area in which settlements developed was an unbounded, isotropic plain. He also worked on the basis that two key variables determined the spatial relationship between buyers and sellers. The *range of a good* represented the maximum distance a consumer was willing to travel to purchase it, while the *threshold of a good* represented the minimum volume of sales necessary for a retailer selling it to be financially viable. For Christaller, the range of a good determined its market area, as consumers would be willing to travel further to purchase expensive goods, meaning that these would have a bigger range and thus a larger catchment area. By grouping various retail establishments into one of seven 'orders', depending upon both the range and threshold of the goods they sold, Christaller was able to construct a model of the expected settlement pattern that would occur across a hypothetical region.

The development of Christaller's model in this way resulted in a hierarchical structuring of central places, with the highest ordered central places being surrounded by a series of progressively lower ordered centres as one moved away. Because of the differing catchment sizes of the various orders of central place, the model had a denser network of lower order centres as compared to higher order centres. Christaller also determined that because of his assumption of a uniform population distribution, the spatial pattern of central places would take the form of a hexagonal lattice, as this was the only spatial structuring that prevented catchment overlap, while still providing full coverage of all goods to the entire regional population. The uniform distribution of the population also meant that as one moved up the orders; all of the goods on offer in lower orders were also present. One of the primary benefits of Christaller's theoretical model was that it could be adapted to provide different spatial patterns of central places, dependent upon specific control 'principles'. In developing his theory, Christaller proposed that there were three key ordering principles: (1) the marketing principle ($k=3$), which provided a spatial

structure where travel distances were minimised (2) the transport principle ($k=4$), which provided a spatial structure where there was an optimised transport network and (3) the administrative principle ($k=7$), which provided a spatial structure where administrative control was most efficient.

Central Place Theory was further refined in 1940, by the German economist August Losch, who felt that Christaller's model did not accurately reflect the true pattern of central places in the real world (Losch, 1954). For Losch, one of the main issues with Christaller's model was its presumption of a uniform population distribution, which ultimately resulted in a uniform pattern of central places, where each order of centre carried the same types of good. Losch believed this to be false and set about adapting the model so that it more accurately depicted the real world development of central places. To do this, Losch chose to start his model with only one economic activity, adding new markets in a logical sequence, until he had built a complete system of market regions. By following this methodology and by liberating himself from the constraints of a uniform population, Losch was able to show that the actual spatial pattern of market centres was not uniform, with certain locations having many central places (city rich sectors) and others having few (city poor sectors). For Losch, this model more accurately portrayed the realities of economic decision making, which were influenced by principles such as the economics of agglomeration or the principle of least effort. While Losch's model was arguably more accurate, it was also more complex, which perhaps explains why it never rose to the same stature as Christaller's theory. Whatever the case, the work of both Losch and Christaller soon came to have a profound effect within geography and the hierarchical structuring of central places, came to be a defining influence in the way planners viewed both the interrelationships between, and structuring of, retail spaces.

4.4.3 The Quantitative Revolution and the Rise of Spatial Science

The work of economic geographers such as Christaller and Losch, and urban sociologists such as Burgess, reflected a growing desire in the early decades of the 20th century to not only develop accurate models of urban structure, but to also find universal laws and theories that governed their development. This formed part of a wider movement in geography, which sought to make the discipline more scientific in nature. As the focus of geographical inquiry had increasingly widened, so too

diversified sub-disciplines had begun to emerge including social, economic, political and urban geography (Johnston and Gregory, 1984). Supporters of this movement believed that the focus should now be on trying to understand spatial relations and the networks that linked places, with the ultimate aim being to identify and define an intrinsic spatial order to the world. For proponents of this approach, in order to understand the science of space, one first had to apply the logic of space (Bunge, 1966).

In the mid-20th century, a defined paradigmatic shift began to occur, which saw the rise of positivism within geography. The newly emerging paradigm came to be referred to as spatial science, reflecting that its supporters viewed space as the key variable in understanding human behaviour and the organisation and structuring of society. For proponents, regions should be viewed as functional systems, where urban settlements developed and were organised based upon economic and social principles that were largely separated from the physical landscape. In this sense, the fundamental objective of spatial science was to construct generalisable models capable of making accurate predictions, by performing highly precise quantitative analysis of spatial distributions, spatial structures and spatial relationships (Berry and Marble, 1968).

Many of the early proponents of using quantitative scientific methods in geography held that human behaviours and interactions over space could be explained by using theoretical ideas and laws from physics. Proponents of this approach, which was referred to as social physics, sought to identify empirical regularities in spatial distributions that could be used as a basis for generalisable theories regarding spatial structures, an area of study that later became known as macrogeography (Stewart, 1950; Warntz, 1965). The ideas associated with social physics really begin to take hold in geography during the early-20th century, with two theoretical concepts – gravity models and diffusion – becoming particularly influential in studies of the spatial distribution and flows of goods and people. Gravity models, which were loosely based upon Newtonian physics, established that principles of distance and size were central to understanding spatial structures and the flows of people and goods within. One of the most notable early developments in this area was ‘Reilly’s Law of Retail Gravitation’, which established that all other things being equal, trade

would flow towards larger and more closely located places (Reilly, 1931). In furthering the physics analogy, Charles Colby proposed that the structure and form of urban environments was a product of competing centrifugal and centripetal forces, which pull and push different land uses both towards and away from the centre (Colby, 1933). The concept of diffusion also originated in physics and, within the context of geographical inquiry, sought to factor in time as a variable that influenced how settlements develop. The work of Thorsten Hagerstrand was particularly notable in this area, as were others who sought to adapt the temporally static model of Central Place Theory to explain how various types of phenomena ‘diffuse’ spatially over time (Hagerstrand, 1952; 1967; see also: Bylund, 1960; Huang and Gould, 1974; Morill, 1962; 1963; Pyle, 1969).

The shift from regional geography to spatial science came to be referred to as the quantitative revolution, a reflection of the widespread adoption of quantitative methodological approaches and development of abstract theoretical models by geographers at this time. The shift towards viewing space in a more abstract manner facilitated new areas of study, including locational analysis and regional science. Locational analysis was primarily concerned with understanding the spatial pattern and order of location using mathematical modelling, with proponents believing that such an approach would enable them to formulate generalisable theories of location, which could be used to predict the spatial pattern of, and linkages between, urban settlements (Haggett, 1965). Locational analysis drew heavily from neo-classical economic theory, although many of the conceptual ideas that underpinned it could actually be found in the work of classical economists dating from the early-19th century. Most notable among these was the work of German economist Johann Heinrich von Thunen who, in 1826, established that distance was the primary determinant in the spatial pattern of agricultural land use (von Thunen, 1966). In balancing the costs of rent and transportation against the desire of farmers to maximise utility, von Thunen deduced that there was an optimal location for all agricultural activities relative to the market.

Despite the significance of this early work, it was not until the work of Christaller, Losch and Alfred Weber – the latter of whom developed a theory of industrial location in 1909 (Weber, 1929) – that these ideas returned to prominence in

geography. By the middle of the 20th century, the profound influence of this small group of German economic geographers accelerated rapidly, as their pioneering work became widely known in the English speaking academic community. Christaller's work, in particular, was the focus of much analysis, with numerous studies adapting, empirically testing or critiquing his theoretical ideas (Barnum, 1966; Berry, 1963, 1967; Berry and Garrison, 1958a, 1958b; Bracey, 1953; Brush, 1953; Brush and Bracey, 1955; Carol, 1960; Carrol, 1955; Garner, 1966; Godlund, 1956; Lomas, 1964; Proudfoot, 1937b; Simmons, 1964; Smailes, 1944; Vining, 1955; Woldenberg, 1968). By the early-1960s, it was estimated that the number of papers focused on Central Place Theory numbered well into the hundreds (Berry and Pred, 1961), reflecting the enthusiasm with which many geographers greeted Christaller's work. One such proponent was the American economist Walter Isard, who sought to build upon the work of Christaller and Losch by establishing the study of 'Regional Science', which combined neo-classical economic theory with 'rigorous' statistical techniques to examine and understand spatial issues within both economics and geography (Isard, 1956; 1960). At the same time, British geographer Brian Berry sought to advance the work of Christaller, by focussing particularly on the hierarchical principle that underpinned his model. In 1958, Berry, along with his colleague William Garrison, formulated the 'Theory of Tertiary Activity' as an extension of Central Place Theory (Berry and Garrison, 1958c).

While much new work at this time was focused upon Christaller and the notion of central places, the Argentinean-American economist William Alonso chose to build upon the work of von Thunen in developing a new theoretical explanation of intra-urban variations in land values and land-use in capitalist societies. Alonso's theory of rent, or 'Bid-Rent Theory', postulated that accessibility and transport costs served as the two primary variables in locational decision-making (Alonso, 1960, 1964). As businesses wanted to keep their costs as low as possible, they would 'bid' to acquire land in more central locations, a process that acted to push up land costs within the CBD and resulted in a differentiation of both land-uses and land-densities across a city. Notably, the importance of distance in locational decision making that was proposed by Alonso mirrored the position of Christaller, who himself had suggested that retail location was determined by the distance a consumer was willing to travel to purchase goods and services.

4.4.4 Structure, Order and Efficiency: The Theoretical Foundations of Retail Planning

The rise of spatial science within geography occurred at the same time that town planning was elevated into mainstream political discourse in Westminster. Accordingly, spatial science and its many advocates came to have a profound influence on the core theoretical and conceptual principles that underpinned the newly emerging practice of town planning. While multiple strands of thought influenced retail planning during this era, perhaps the most notable was the work of Walter Christaller and his development of Central Place Theory. For planners, the clear ordering of central places was seen as an efficient and logical arrangement of market locations, one that would maximise economic prosperity. As a result, the hierarchical ordering of central places proposed in the model became a defining tenet of planning practice, one that acted to reinforce the idea of early urban-sociologists that there was an idealised urban form. Accordingly, distance was also established as the key variable in understanding the behaviour of both consumers and retailers, while it was in maths and economics that the answers to urban problems would be found. The coalescence of geographical and planning ideals reached a peak in the 1950s and 1960s, when the development of more advanced predictive modelling enabled geographers to assess and predict patterns of development, facilitating a mindset that effective planning could not only remedy the urban and social ills of the past, but also design and plan urban environments that were worthy of future generations. For planners, the search for unifying laws and theories regarding the spatial patterns and organisation of urban settlements, which formed the bedrock of spatial science, served as an ideal framework upon which they could seek to design and develop ordered and efficient towns and cities. For both, there was a clear belief that the scientific approach was not only coherent and logical, but also provided the necessary antithesis to so many urban and social problems that were seen to plague Britain's urban environment.

4.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore both the origins of town planning in Britain and the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning. In doing so, it has been shown that the ideological basis for planning was borne out of the need to

rectify social ills in Britain's towns and cities during the 19th century, which spurred on visionaries, who believed that it was through planned urban settlements that urban and social problems would be resolved. At the same time, the development of new ideas regarding urban form and development fundamentally shaped the conceptual and theoretical understanding of urban environments in planning, establishing a series of key principles that became central to retail planning, including the idea that 'central places' take the form of a structured hierarchy and that spatial pattern of land-use in cities can be understood as being functionally related to the role of town centres. As such, the importance of early theoretical developments in urban geography cannot be understated and despite the length of time that has elapsed since Burgess, Christaller and others developed their pioneering models, many of the key foundational principles that were defined at this time, continue to influence and hold sway over planners today.

5 RETAIL PLANNING IN THE 1950S AND 1960S: THE GOLDEN AGE OF POST WAR PLANNING

5.1 Introduction

In the decades following on from the end of the Second World War, town planning in Britain grew significantly in stature, facilitated by widespread support for Keynesian social-democratic policies. The following chapter explores this period of growth in planning, focussing specifically on the emergence of two new retail innovations, which came to not only have a profound impact upon the way we shopped, but also where we shopped. The chapter begins by examining the impetus to rebuild Britain in the decades after the end of the Second World War (section 5.2), before exploring how retail in Britain was revolutionised by new organisational and operational techniques, which arrived from America at this time (section 5.3). It then moves on to consider how these changes began to impact the physical structure and spatial pattern of retail in Britain (section 5.4), and the problem this created for planners, who lacked any formalised guidance on how to deal with emergent changes in retail (section 5.5). The chapter concludes by considering the wider challenges that planning faced during this period, examining the subsequent planning reform that it was held would finally make the system workable (section 5.6).

5.2 The Birth of British Consumer Democracy

When the Second World War ended in September 1945, the United Kingdom and its allies emerged victorious, having defeated the rising threat of fascism in Europe. While outwardly appearing to maintain its position as one of the world's foremost powers, internally Britain was on its knees. Many towns and cities had suffered significant destruction at the hands of axis bombing raids, while Britain's aging industrial and manufacturing sectors were seen as increasingly inefficient when compared to nations such as the United States. The toll of the war on Britain's Empire was also significant and as a growing number of nations sought their independence, the country's once massive socio-economic, cultural and technological influence increasingly began to wane.

The years following the war were a time of significant change. Like much of Europe, the country's focus was on beginning the long and arduous process of recovery from the economic and social strain it had suffered. Eager to help, the United States offered financial assistance to Britain and other European nations to assist in their recovery. The European Recovery Programme, commonly referred to as the 'Marshall Plan', was aimed at helping European nations to rebuild their economies, whilst promoting trade ties between Europe and the United States. Keen to take advantage of this offer, the United Kingdom agreed to the terms of the plan, beginning the process through which the United States sought to 'modernise' and 'liberalise' the economies of Western and Southern Europe (Hogan, 1987). While the main driving force behind the Marshall Plan was economic, in that it gave the United States access to a valuable export market, there was also a significant political motive. Following the end of the war, tensions between the United States and Soviet Union steadily increased and, as nations throughout Europe began aligning themselves to one side or the other, the Marshall Plan helped to 'bind' Western Europe to the American ideal of consumer democracy (De Grazia, 2005).

The period following the end of the Second World War was thus a time when Britain increasingly looked towards the United States, as it sought to rebuild and redefine itself in the post-war era. In addition to the political and economic support that it provided, the United States soon began having a profound social and cultural influence over the country, facilitated by a common language and significant

advances in communication and transportation technology. As Britain sought to recover from the devastating effects of the war, the United States came to be seen as a model for the type of society that Britain should aspire to be. American industry, which was built upon the use of assembly lines and information systems was seen as highly efficient when compared with Britain, while the American household redefined what constituted necessity for the general population. At the heart of this vision of America was the belief that the values of freedom and democracy were inextricably tied to the concept of American free market capitalism (De Grazia, 2005). For citizens of war-ravaged Britain, who struggled with the daily realities of rationing and austerity, the image of the prosperous American household came to provide a utopian glimpse of what American consumer democracy could bring.

5.3 The Americanisation of British Retail

In the decades following the end of the Second World War, the process of ‘Americanisation’ in British social and cultural life accelerated rapidly and while it led to numerous profound changes across almost all areas of British life, perhaps the most notable change it brought was the rise of consumerism and consumer culture. At the forefront of this was a revolution in retailing that affected not only the way consumers thought and acted, but through significant organisational, technological and logistical innovations, fundamentally changed the way that British retailers operated and structured their businesses as well.

5.3.1 A Retailing Revolution: The Arrival of Self-Service Shopping

In the years following the war, Britain suffered significant labour shortages that acted to push up wage costs, resulting in an increasing need to improve the efficiency of the retail sector (Towney, 1964). Recognising this, many retail firms and trade publications emphasised the benefits that could be obtained by adopting the ‘self-service’ format commonly utilised by American retailers, whereby consumers had access to, and were free to browse products without the need for any employee assistance. Evidence from America suggested that retailers could benefit from reduced costs and increased sales, while consumers could benefit from lower prices and a broader selection of goods (Shaw, Curth and Alexander, 2004).

In spite of its prescribed advantages, uptake in Britain was relatively slow and early ventures were often experimental in nature (Shaw and Alexander, 2008). The cause of this initial ambivalence towards self-service was often attributed to the continuing existence of resale price maintenance and post-war rationing, both of which acted to largely negate any of its potential benefits (McClelland, 1963; Pickering, 1966). Unlike the United States, where price was already a central determinant of shopping behaviour, the existence of resale price maintenance meant that service and quality were more highly valued by customers in Britain and, as a result, retailers were wary of how consumers would react to such a fundamental change in the way they shopped (Du Gay, 2004). At the same time, many retailers were also aware that simply converting a store to a self-service format would not automatically give them an increase in sales, and that any conversion needed to be part of broader long term strategy, which fundamentally sought to alter and adapt not only the store layout and design, but also marketing and promotional techniques, as well as the managerial and organisational structure of the business (Cherriman and Wilson, 1962; Parry, 1965).

Despite the relatively slow start, by the mid-1950s the growth of self-service retailing in Britain began to accelerate. The end of rationing in 1954, coupled with the breakdown of resale price maintenance in the grocery sector from 1956 onwards, made self-service a more enticing and realistic proposition. Multiple grocery-retailers who had initially been wary of the format began to embrace it and by the early-1960s self-service was well on the way to becoming the dominant retail format in Britain, with almost 16,000 self-service outlets by the end of 1964 (Pickering, 1966). The spread of the self-service retail format in Britain soon began to have an impact upon retailing more generally by facilitating and encouraging changes in the way firms operated and structured themselves. Practices such as pre-packaging and mixed merchandising became more common, while there was a breakdown in the economy of loyalty, which had traditionally been a core component of retail in Britain. Instead, a focus on product-range and promotional and marketing strategies became an increasingly important component of the retail business (Fulop, 1973). Branding became more common and, as retailers no longer needed to specialise in one area, different stores increasingly came to stock the same products. Critically, no longer was quality the primary determinant of choice in retail, it was now price (Fulop, 1964).

In addition to the impacts upon business practices and consumer behaviours, the arrival of self-service in Britain also had a profound impact upon the nature of working practices as well. Evidence suggested that the greater freedom it afforded employees, had a positive impact on levels of female participation in retailing, which increased significantly following its introduction (Shaw and Alexander, 2008). A particularly significant impact of the organisational restructuring that occurred as firms introduced self-service, was that in order to increase efficiency, labour was increasingly organised according to Taylorist principles, whereby different stages in the process operated as isolated units (Shaw, Curth and Alexander, 2004). This meant that employees became more highly skilled in just one area, as they were not expected to participate in other aspects of the business. This was highly beneficial for retailers, as it improved the overall efficiency of the system while reducing costs (McClelland, 1963); however, this ultimately acted to deskill the labour force in retail, as roles became more specialised (Du Gay, 2004).

5.3.2 The Birth of Britain's Supermarkets: A New Challenge for Planning

The arrival of self-service in Britain heralded not only a fundamental change in how people shopped, but also marked the beginning of a major shift in where they shopped as well. As self-service had grown to dominate retailing in the US, an associated form of development had also become dominant: the 'super' market (De Grazia, 2005). The supermarket developed in depression-era America, during a time when household incomes were being squeezed and retailers sought new and inventive ways to reduce costs and prices, while also attracting more customers (Bowlby, 2001). Notable for their unique design and structure, supermarkets were larger than traditional grocery stores and supplied a much wider range of goods, often at significantly lower prices. In much the same way as with self-service, the dispersion of the supermarket in Britain was a slow process. Post-war restrictions on building materials limited development opportunities and the continued existence of resale price maintenance, prevented retailers from passing on to consumers any potential economic benefits that supermarkets could bring. The result was that in the early stages of dispersion, experimentation was commonplace, and it was noticeable that the working definition of what constituted a supermarket in Britain at this time, differed considerably from the United States (Alexander, 2008).

Another reason for the slow uptake of the supermarket format was the lack of qualified and competent managers capable of operating larger stores (Towney, 1964); however, it was also suggested that development was being stifled by the general stance of town planners who were largely opposed to retailers' preference for out-of-town development. At this time, planning advocated that urban environments should be spatially organised under consistent and orderly principles, which were inherently defined upon academic foundations such as Central Place Theory (Dawson, 1980; Guy, 2007). Supermarket retailers, however, had a preference for larger out-of-town sites that allowed them to both stock more lines and also be as close as possible to their core consumers, who were more often than not the more affluent populations living in suburban areas. This conflicting position between retailers and planners meant that some were soon questioning whether the supermarket format would actually ever be able to establish itself in Britain (Towney, 1964). The reality was, however, that as much as planners would have liked to keep retailing in town centres, the huge demand for out-of-town development never dissipated and, recognising the need to do what was best for society, planners increasingly accepted that some out-of-town retail development was now inevitable.

5.4 Planning for Retail in Post-War Britain

The emerging pressure for out-of-centre retail development soon began to pose a particular challenge for planners, who had very little in the way of guidance regarding how to deal with it. For planners, retail had always been viewed as a central function of the town centre and, as such, beyond the need for smaller amounts of local retail provision, it was generally deemed to fall under this remit. As a result, planners had to rely on what guidance they did have when making decisions regarding how to handle proposals for new retail spaces, resulting in a highly restrictive planning stance that sought to make new retail development conform to the 'natural' structure and order of the retail hierarchy.

5.4.1 Post-War Retail Planning: Cars, Consumers and Central Places

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the prevailing position of planning was that the urban environments should adhere to a specific spatial

structure, whereby different land-uses and economic activities were located within specific zones, which should be developed within the urban environment at locations most in accordance with their function (MTCP, 1947b). Concerning retail, it was determined that shops were “a most important use within central areas” (MTCP, 1947b, paragraph 90) and that, as such, they should be located there as a matter of priority, with some provision in local neighbourhood parades for those items bought more frequently. As part of the programme to rebuild bomb damaged towns and cities in the post-war period, planners continued to adhere to these principles when formulating plans for the redevelopment of town and city centres, reflecting the fact that at this time, retail development was inextricably linked to town centre development in government literature. The rigidity of this stance soon came in for criticism for its failure to acknowledge other factors that influenced consumer behaviour (Low, 1975) and the undue focus that it placed upon the redevelopment of town-centre retail environments (Cox, 1968, cited in Guy, 2007). It was only with the growth of new residential areas on the peripheral regions of towns and cities that it became accepted that additional retail provision was required outside of the town centre, in order to meet growing consumer demand. It was subsequently determined, however, that this should be provided through new district centres, rather than stand-alone superstores, as these could be incorporated into the existing hierarchy (Burns, 1959; Guy, 2007).

The desire of planners to keep new retail development within the existing retail hierarchy was not without its own issues. As levels of car ownership continued to rise, there grew increasing acknowledgement that roads and parking needed to be afforded a higher priority in the planning of town centres. A 1963 report warned of the dangers of uncontrolled urban sprawl, suggesting that there was a fundamental need to acknowledge the inherent link between buildings and traffic, and a need for a concerted focus to address the use of land in town centres that was contributing to congestion (Crowther, 1963; MoT, 1963). The report was critical of the fact that up until that point planners had largely overlooked the impact of the car, giving almost no attention to it in the formulation of development plans.

Recognising the increasing pressures that planners were facing in town centres, the government in the early-1960s released a series of planning bulletins, which

represented the first significant new guidance provided in this area in over ten years. Of particular note was *Town Centres: Approach to Renewal*, which called for an integrated approach to tackling urban issues (MHLG, 1962); and *Town Centres: Current Practice*, which sought to identify and highlight examples of best practice (MHLG, 1963). Both bulletins made explicit reference to the importance of town centres and the valuable role that retail played in them, as well as highlighting the government's stance on many other issues, including their support for the mixing of land uses and the existence of residential populations in central areas. Another bulletin, published in 1965, built upon the findings of the Buchanan Report, and provided a stark warning that a failure to provide adequate parking facilities could not only affect a town's retail trade, but also its overall economic wellbeing (MHLG, 1965a).

Despite the new planning guidance provided by the government, there remained a distinct lack of information regarding how planners should look to deal with the ever-expanding retail sector and the pressures this was placing upon the built environment. The guidance note *Town Centres: Approach to Renewal* had emphasised that "the basic use pattern in the centre of most towns has developed slowly, will normally change slowly and can be regarded as broadly settled" (MHLG, 1962, para 93); however, this had been published before the built retail environment really began to be affected by the emergence of new retail forms. In subsequent guidance, the issue of how to address new retail development was largely absent, which created an element of uncertainty for planners and ultimately acted to re-enforce the prevailing position by way of omission (Guy, 2007). Without any new formalised guidance, planners interpreted this as reinforcing the de-facto position regarding the role of retail in town centres and the limitations that should be placed upon retail development in more suburban areas.

5.4.2 The First Wave of Retail Decentralisation

The arrival of self-service and the supermarket following the end of the Second World War had a profound impact upon the nature of retailing in Britain. However, it was not until the mid-1960s that major changes began to occur in the built retail environment, when broader socio-economic forces began to affect the form and structure of urban spaces more widely. During the 1960s, the process of

suburbanisation began to accelerate, as increasing levels of household income enabled more people to pursue a better life in the suburban fringes of towns and cities. Aspirational images of the 'American Ideal' were often characterised by suburban homes, spacious living areas and new technologies, and it wasn't long before the suburbs came to be caricatured as spaces for the 'middle classes' (Silverstone, 1997). Of course, the growth of suburban areas around British towns and cities was not an entirely new phenomenon (Mumford, 1989); however, it was during the post-war period that the process really began to have a profound effect, facilitated by technological developments, rising incomes and the increasing need for more housing.

With wartime building restrictions lifted, levels of household income on the rise and a burgeoning suburban middle class, retailers increasingly saw the benefits of developing new stores in suburban locations. For retailers, the position was simple. They wanted to locate where their costs would be lowest and potential for sales was highest. Given the space constraints and high costs of land in town centres and given their desire to locate as close as possible to the more affluent and mobile suburban consumer, retailers instinctively sought sites in out-of-centre or out-of-town locations. It was thus during the mid-1960s that the UK first witnessed the process of what Schiller (1986; 1988; 1994) termed, 'retail decentralisation', when in 1964, GEM opened what is widely recognised as being the first out-of-town retail store in the United Kingdom (Whysall, 2005). During this first-wave of retail decentralisation, the push for development was largely driven by grocery retailers (Schiller, 1986), who sought to develop large superstores or supermarkets, which contrasted with the more department store style hypermarkets, which had emerged in France several years earlier (Guy, 1998a).

The growth of out-of-town superstores was initially very slow, in part, because planners sought to guide as much new investment as possible into town centres. Planning's resistance to out-of-town formats was epitomised by how they dealt with the emergence of another imported American retail concept at this time: the 'shopping mall'. In 1956, the Southdale Mall opened in Minneapolis, becoming the world's first fully enclosed out-of-town shopping centre (Lowe, 2000). When the concept was imported into the UK, several developments were planned; however,

these met with significant resistance from planners (Guy, 2007; Schiller, 1986). As a result, the concept of the American-style shopping mall was instead adapted to fit into the existing retail hierarchy and during the 1960s and 1970s there was a proliferation of new covered shopping centres constructed in British town and city centres (Davies and Kirby, 1980; Dawson, 1983). Recognising that planners were unlikely to grant permission for isolated freestanding superstores, retailers and developers soon began to propose that new superstores be developed as hubs in district centres, which were already part of the existing retail hierarchy. As planners were acutely aware of the need for new district centres in many suburban developments, what emerged was a mutually beneficial reciprocal arrangement whereby planners gained the required support to develop new district centres, while retailers and developers were able to build larger stores in the suburbs without the need to overcome local authority opposition (Guy, 2007).

5.5 The Need for Reform in Post-War Planning

At the same time that planners were being challenged by the emergence of new forms of retail development, the practice more widely was itself being challenged by issues of bureaucracy and poor performance. In the years following on from the end of the war, the continuation of post-war rationing, coupled with the use of restrictive building licenses, had acted to stifle levels of private sector development, while a lack of available funds had similarly curtailed public sector building schemes (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006). At the same time, there was a growing conflict between urban and rural interests over the most appropriate location for new development. As urban local authorities were in need of additional land to accommodate displaced populations from inner city areas, new housing developments soon began to pop up on the peripheries of major cities or in nearby 'overspill' towns, much to the displeasure of rural local authorities, who believed that this land should be protected for the purpose of agricultural development. Recognising the problematic nature of what was occurring, the government in 1955 introduced a system of greenbelts around major urban areas, which aimed to restrict development and control the outward expansion of towns and cities, in order to avoid a repeat of the large-scale urban sprawl that had characterised the interwar years.

By the beginning of the 1960s, the political and economic outlook for Britain was looking increasingly gloomy, as the country's economic performance continued to lag behind many of its Western European neighbours. For town planning, the problem appeared to be that the system was becoming overly bureaucratic. One reason for this was that much of the impetus for planning was now becoming dated, with the development plans being drawn up by local planning authorities often being based upon pre-war and wartime issues (Davies, 1998). Another problem for planning was the emergence of an increasingly divisive split between planners and 'the planned'. In many regards this reflected the fact that planning was increasingly oversimplifying incredibly complex issues, evidenced by the destructive nature of inner city slum clearance schemes, which were criticised for not only destroying areas of historic value, but also the communities and social identities that had once existed there (Cherry, 1996; Davies, 1998).

Recognising that there were clearly fundamental issues within the planning system, the government in 1964 established the Planning Advisory Group (PAG) to look into the problem of delays in the planning system and the generally disappointing outcomes being produced. In 1965, they released a report, which was critical of the overly detailed and rigid nature of the planning system, which they felt was resulting in plans becoming "more and more out of touch with emergent planning problems and policies" (MHLG, 1965b, paragraph 1.24). The report went on to suggest that such were the scale of the problems in the development plan system that what was needed instead was "a radical re-appraisal of the form and function of development plans" (MHLG, 1965b, paragraph 1.32). The PAG concluded that the planning system needed to become more efficient and flexible, more effectively integrated into other areas of local governance and more open and transparent with the public. In accordance with this they proposed the development of a new two-tier planning system comprised of structure plans and local action plans, to acknowledge the fundamentally different 'strategic' and 'tactical' decisions that needed to be made (Cherry, 1996; Davies, 1998). They went on to suggest that central government's role should only be to provide guidance and clarity and that detailed decision-making should ultimately be left to local authorities.

Three years following the publication of the PAG report, the government passed into law the Town and Country Planning Act, 1968. Built largely upon its recommendations, the act established a new two-tier development planning system (Davies, 1998), which sought to make planning more flexible, integrated and responsive to the changing demands of society, by fundamentally redefining the relationship between planners and the planned. It also sought to make planning more 'scientific' and 'objective', by encouraging the use of mathematical techniques and computer modelling (Bor, 1974). In passing the new act, the government felt it had now resolved the underlying issues in the post-war planning system, which meant that planning could finally begin to make some real progress.

5.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the evolution of retail and retail planning policy in Britain from the end of the Second World War until the end of the 1960s, a period during which the country underwent profound social, economic and physical change. In doing so, it has been shown that a series of retailing innovations that arrived from the United States, fundamentally redefined retailing in Britain, including the physical retail landscape, which was impacted by the emergent process of retail decentralisation. At the same time, it has also been shown that a lack of planning guidance relating to this specific issue saw planners increasingly reinforce the existing position, which involved limiting new out-of-centre retail development and re-emphasising the town centre as the natural home of retail. In this sense, it is arguable that it was during this era that 'town-centre-first', as a retail-planning concept, was first seen. As the period progressed, various new forms of retail development emerged; however, these were viewed with scepticism by planners, who continued to adhere to the underlying theoretical and conceptual principles of traditional economics models. As a result, these new forms of retail were adapted and altered, in order that they fit into the existing retail hierarchy, effectively establishing a 'restrictive' developmental trajectory that continues to this day.

6 RETAIL PLANNING IN THE 1970s: THE FIRST STEPS IN AN ERA OF UNCERTAINTY

6.1 Introduction

By the late 1960s, planning was arguably at its peak; however, less than a decade later and questions regarding its effectiveness were being voiced by numerous groups. The following chapter explores this period of turbulence, focussing specifically on how increasing pressures within Britain's towns and cities not only necessitated a renewed focus upon retail planning, but also more widely led to a shift in policy emphasis away from physical and towards social issues. The chapter begins by examining the rapid acceleration of retail decentralisation in Britain from the late-1960s onwards, considering how planning responded to this with the development of the first ever standalone guidance for retail development (section 6.2). It then moves on to explore how continuing social issues in British towns and cities led to the government shifting from the largely physical focus of town planning towards broader urban policy initiatives, which sought to coordinate physical redevelopment with wider social and economic regeneration (sections 6.3). The chapter then considers the growing criticism of both planning and its underlying foundations in spatial science (section 6.4), examining how this ultimately sowed the seeds of a split between retail planning practice and wider theoretical development in this area (section 6.5). The chapter concludes by examining how, in the late-1970s, a 'perfect

storm' of factors ultimately led to the demise of the post-war planning ideal (section 6.6).

6.2 The Acceleration of Retail Decentralisation

In the two decades following on from the end of the Second World War, the stance of planners towards new, out-of-centre retail development was largely restrictive, with new development being expected to fit into the existing retail hierarchy. When this stance was combined with wider economic and social conditions, it created a climate in which emergent new forms of retail struggled to gain a foothold in Britain. By the late 1960s, however, it became apparent that as much as planning would like to limit retail development to the existing retail hierarchy, the drive for change could not be held back.

6.2.1 Bulky Goods and Retail Warehouses: The Second Wave Arrives

By the late-1960s the pace of change in British retail was starting to become an issue for planners, who were not only having to address the growing pressure for new retail development, but also technological innovations such as the car, which were leading to an expansion of the boundaries of geographical competition in retail and fundamentally upsetting the traditional hierarchical understanding of retail distribution (Fulop, 1973). The acceleration of suburbanisation during the 1950s and 1960s had led to what Dawson termed a “decentralisation of demand” in retail (Dawson, 1974, p156) and this, when combined with the new strategic and operational imperatives of retailers, ultimately manifested into rapidly growing demand for out-of-centre retail space. At the same time, broader societal changes, such as increased levels of disposable income, increased levels of female participation in the labour market, new refrigeration technologies and increased levels of car ownership, facilitated a shift in many consumers' preference towards shopping in larger grocery superstores (Rees, 1987). As a result, in the space of just a few years, the process of retail decentralisation became firmly established and from just a handful of grocery retailers in the mid-1960s, the number of proposals for out-of-centre and out-of-town retail developments increased significantly into the early 1970s (Jones, 1978).

At this time, demand for new out-of-centre retail space largely came from grocery retailers. While most retailers preferred standalone sites, the restrictive stance of planners meant that many new superstores were developed as focal points for district centres instead (Sumner and Davies, 1978; URPI, 1977). Over time, this became an increasing issue for planners, as their underlying preference was for district centres to serve as social and communal hubs. As more and more district centres became focussed around large grocery superstores, this had the impact of not only significantly increasing their catchment size, but also shifting their primary focus onto retail, which often resulted in them lacking local service provision (Shaw, 1986). The problem for planners was that, because they were concerned that without the backing of a major retailer, new district schemes would never come to fruition, many allowed new retail developments that were, in all actuality, not ideally suited for the local area (Guy, 2007).

While new grocery superstores were the primary driver of retail decentralisation at this time, they were not the only form of retail development that planners had to deal with. In the early-1970s, a new form of out-of-centre retailing began to emerge that involved the sale of non-food items: the retail warehouse. Unlike the first wave of retail decentralisation, this second wave represented the first venture into the out-of-town market by comparison goods retailers and was driven primarily by the growth of three retail sectors: DIY, household furnishings and electrical goods (Jones, 1984; URPI, 1982). Notably, however, whereas the movement of grocery retailers into the suburbs was driven by a desire to be closer to the more affluent consumer, retail warehouses largely came about because the bulky items they stocked could not be easily sold from town centre sites. Accordingly, by the late-1970s, non-food retailers had become an increasingly significant driver of retail decentralisation and by the end of the decade, the development rate of retail warehouses surpassed that of grocery superstores (Jones, 1984). The more rapid acceleration of retail warehouse development reflected the fact that many planners saw such development as being less of a competitive threat to existing town centres, because the goods being sold through these outlets were too large to be sold from town centres anyway (Gibbs, 1981; Guy, 2007).

6.2.2 DCPN13: The Emergence of Standalone Retail Planning Policy

Despite the numerous pieces of new planning guidance that were produced during the 1960s and despite the significant reform that had taken place with the passing of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1968, there remained a fundamental gap in how local planning authorities should look to address proposals for new retail development, especially in instances when the proposal was for a site outside of the town centre. The problems being caused by this lack of guidance were highlighted in a 1971 report, which illustrated the likely future pattern of retailing in Britain, including expected levels of growth and the likely locations that this would take place (DTEDC, 1971). The report highlighted the current overdevelopment of retail space in many British towns and cities, and suggested that there was a need for some form of centralised government guidance on how development should occur.

The following year, the government responded by issuing the first official planning guidance for retail development in the form of a policy note entitled *Development Control Policy Note 13: Out of Town Shops and Shopping Centres* (DCPN13). The guidance suggested that the government's stance was neither in favour of, nor against, out-of-town development, instead stating that it was "not the function of land use planning to prevent competition between retailers or between methods of retailing nor to preserve existing commercial interests as such" (DoE, 1972, para 6). Rather it called upon planners, developers and retailers to take full consideration of all factors when considering where retail developments should occur, acknowledging that many suburban residential developments were lacking in quality retail provision. However, in considering the need for retail developments in such areas, the report did suggest that there may be "more advantage to the community in proposals for a well-planned district centre" as they offered "better possibilities for providing associated commercial and social facilities" (DoE, 1972, para 9).

An updated version of DCPN13 was published in 1977, entitled *Development Control Policy Note 13: Large New Stores*. While the content of the new note was largely unchanged from the 1972 version, it did provide more expansive guidance in many areas, including the formulation of development plans, accessibility to retail developments and the 'assessment of demand' (DoE, 1977a). However, it once again failed to explicitly state what the government's position was regarding new out-of-

centre retail developments, simply restating that it was not the role of planners to get involved in competitive matters and that instead they should “form a balanced judgement on the advantages and disadvantages of the proposal to the community as a whole” (DoE, 1977a, para 2). While both the 1972 and 1977 versions of DCPN13 were only relatively small and in many regards failed to explicitly deal with the need for high quality shopping provision that had been identified through the DTEDC report, they did finally provide some form of centralised guidance on the issue of new retail development. In doing so, this acted to promote retail development from simply being a side issue in broader town centre planning policy to a unique planning issue in its own right.

6.3 From Physical to Social Regeneration

Just as the emergent issues in retail planning began to receive the attention that they had long warranted, the practice more widely was once again approaching a crossroads, with lingering questions continuing to be asked regarding its overall effectiveness, its lack of flexibility and the increasingly protracted and bureaucratic development process. The focus on post-war reconstruction had now given way to concerns over rapid population growth and the need for more, better-quality housing. At the same time, increasing social and economic instability reflected a growing unease amongst many regarding the current direction of the country, and following Enoch Powell’s infamous ‘rivers of blood’ speech in 1968, the issues of poverty, immigration, urban decay and crime were thrust once more into the political spotlight.

Recognising the magnitude of the problems they faced and acknowledging that planning was not doing enough to address social problems, the government in 1968 launched the Urban Programme, through which it sought to address the ‘severe social deprivation’ that had become localised in small pockets of a number of British towns and cities (HL Deb, 22 July 1968). The emphasis of the programme was using central government funding to address those issues that were being overlooked by other current policy initiatives, notably health, education, housing and welfare. In doing so, it represented a significant shift in government policy, moving beyond the traditional physical focus of town planning, towards a new socially focussed urban policy approach (Johnstone and Whitehead, 2004). While the launch of the Urban

Programme marked the beginning of a significant shift in the approach to tackling urban issues, its overall effectiveness in the early years was largely limited, in part because of its failure to address underlying economic issues (Atkinson and Moon, 1994; Pacione, 2009), but also because it continued to view poverty and deprivation as being products of social pathology (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006). The 'culture of poverty' theory of social behaviour had held significant sway over planning approaches in the preceding three decades, so it was perhaps unsurprising that it had been carried over into the new approach. However, no sooner had the new policy been introduced than it was already being criticised for its fundamental failure to acknowledge the broader structural causes of poverty and deprivation (Tallon, 2010).

The initial failure of the Urban Programme resulted in the government conducting a series of studies that looked into the current issues facing inner city areas, including their causes and potential solutions. The outcome of these studies increasingly pointed towards poverty and deprivation being an outcome of the widespread unemployment that had followed economic restructuring during the post-war decades (CDP, 1977; Tallon, 2010). Accordingly, by the mid-1970s, the government began to acknowledge that the urban and social ills that plagued urban areas were reflective of entrenched structural economic issues and not social deviance, as had long been presumed. In acknowledging that social problems were a product of structural weaknesses in the local economy, the government now recognised that physical solutions alone would not suffice and what was needed was some form of coordinated intervention that brought together previously detached economic, social and environmental policies. At the same time, it was also recognised that the existing physical emphasis of suburban peripheral and new town developments failed to address the underlying social and economic issues of displaced populations, and what was actually required were targeted programmes aimed at improving the economic and social conditions of the inner cities.

The culmination of this change in approach arrived in 1977, with the publication of the white paper *Policy for the Inner Cities*, which notably acknowledged that many entrenched urban and social issues were a result of structural economic weaknesses (DoE, 1977b). As such, the paper emphasised the need for a coordinated approach that elevated social and economic regeneration to the same level as urban

redevelopment, with it now being accepted that local authorities alone could not be expected to resolve the manifest social issues they were facing. Accordingly, the paper emphasised the importance of effective partnership between different stakeholders, including local authorities, the government, the private sector and local community groups. While the inner cities white paper provided a renewed focus and framework for urban policy at the end of the 1970s, the reality was that most of the policy programmes that were envisioned within it never came to fruition. Concerns over levels of government spending, coupled with local authorities already being financially over-stretched, meant that early initiatives were limited (Gibson and Longstaff, 1982; Pacione, 2009). Perhaps more problematically, the growing criticism of state planning had seen a groundswell of support for a new neo-liberal doctrine that would soon take hold in Westminster. Nevertheless, the 1977 inner cities white paper remains a watershed moment in British urban policy: it established that structural economic weaknesses were the primary cause of decline and deprivation; it established that both policy coordination and stakeholder partnership were necessary prerequisites for effective regeneration; and perhaps most notably of all, it shifted the emphasis of planning from new suburban development to inner city regeneration and in doing so, once again re-established the central areas of towns and cities as the primary location of new urban development.

6.4 Social Justice and the Demise of Spatial Science

The 1977 inner cities white paper marked a pivotal turning point in the way the government understood the urban and social issues that were plaguing Britain's towns and cities. However, the reality was that this came too late to stop the growing criticisms of town planning, which reflected both concerns about the continuation of urban and social issues, as well as the broader rejection of positivism within geography. Spatial science, which for so long had served as a foundation for planning practice was deemed the issue and its associated presumptions of structure, order and generalisable laws of behaviour and development were seen to be at the root of the systemic and sustained failings of town planning.

6.4.1 The Failure of Post-War Planning

In the 1970s, many urban areas in Britain were still suffering from acute problems of urban decay, crime, poverty and social deprivation, which were being exacerbated, as the process of deindustrialisation took hold. The failure of planning to bring about meaningful and lasting change soon saw questions being asked regarding the validity of government policy approaches and the theoretical and conceptual ideas that underpinned them. When spatial science had first emerged, it was intended to serve as means by which geographical research could be used to help solve real world problems, by providing a useful base for policy development. By the late-1960s, however, the continuing relevance of this approach was being questioned, with many pointing out that there had been a continuation of and, in some instances, growth of social issues, within major western nations during the 1950s and 1960s.

In previous decades, planners had primarily attempted to alleviate social and urban issues through slum clearance programmes, which moved residential populations from deprived inner city neighbourhoods into newly planned purpose-built residential areas. Large-scale housing developments and open green spaces were frequently combined with high-rise tenements and towering blocks of flats in ‘Corbusian’ tradition, to create vast inner city and peripheral housing estates that were intended to provide a vastly improved standard of living (Cherry, 1996). The problem was, this approach did not seem to work, and many areas continued to suffer from the same social issues that had plagued the inner city neighbourhoods they replaced. At the same time, the rise of new forms of social activism such as the civil rights movement, feminism and environmentalism were seen to speak to deeply rooted divisions in society and for many geographers this led to obvious questions regarding the continuing relevance of the supposedly objective and rational approach of spatial science. While societies continued to be plagued by significant socio-economic, environmental and political issues, spatial science seemed “incapable of saying anything of depth or profundity” (Harvey, 1973, p129).

One of the main issues that critics had with approaches at the time was the underlying assumption that planners could control urban development, with many arguing that urban spaces were constantly evolving and that this dynamism meant that traditional views of utopian planned cities were not only misguided, but also

unobtainable (Hall 1974; Pahl, 1970). For many, the weakness of spatial science lay in its conceptualisation of space in abstract terms, effectively isolated from the social processes and forces that created it. Due to its tendency to draw heavily from neo-classical economic theory, this resulted in models being produced that had little applicability to real world situations, and when models were empirically tested, they were often shown to be poor approximations for real world evidence. The approaches of spatial science were also criticised for their perceived narrow focus and the esoteric nature of much of their output (Harvey, 1989; Stoddart, 1986). The fact that planning had altruistic motives was irrelevant because its fundamental failure to understand the complex social nature of urban problems meant its actions were ultimately only benefitting the wealthy elite. By viewing cities simply as physical entities in need of physical solutions, planning was fundamentally failing the most vulnerable in society.

The criticisms levelled at state planning and spatial science, formed part of a wider movement that sought to reject the positivist paradigm that underpinned geographical inquiry at this time. Broadly speaking, this rejection reflected the emergence of two new competing schools of thought that sought to replace spatial science: Humanistic geography and Marxist geography. Proponents of Humanistic geography (Buttimer, 1979; Ley and Samuels, 1978; Tuan, 1976, 1977) argued that positivism and quantification underplayed the role of human agency in the way people behaved and made decisions. For them, the rational economic man assumption was unrealistic because it ignored people's attitudes, values and feelings. The economically and geometrically rooted approach effectively turned humans into nothing more than passive respondents whose behaviours were at the whim of abstract spatial logic. For humanistic geographers, there was a belief that geographical inquiry should be focussed upon the 'social construction' of space and place, as opposed to the existing focus upon the spatial ordering of societies.

Proponents of Marxist geography (Castells, 1977; Harvey, 1973, 1982, 1985; Massey, 1973, 1978; 1984; Smith, 1979) argued that spatial science failed to provide any meaningful explanation for the largely descriptive, quantitative modelling of urban spaces that formed the majority of its output. In doing so, they argued that it overlooked the social conflict and injustice that was so endemic in western capitalist

societies. Accordingly, they asserted that the universal laws sought by spatial scientists ignored the unique geographical and historical variations in spatial arrangement that existed within different societies. As a result, spatial scientists acted to reinforce the dominant socio-economic and political ideologies of the ruling elite, by treating the geographical relations of urban areas not as the outcome of unique and diverse social processes, but rather as geometric spatial patterns that should conform to an idealised structure. Marxist geographers were particularly scathing in their assessment of the manner in which state planning operated, with many holding the view that the actions of the state often acted to perpetuate social problems rather than solve them (Castells, 1977; Gregory, 1978; Harvey, 1973). For these critics, planning needed to be viewed not as an objective, technocratic exercise, but rather as a defined political and economic process, one that both grew out of and contributed towards socially distinctive processes of social production and reproduction (Ambrose, 1986). Accordingly, it was argued that planning was part of a wider ‘civilising’ process performed by the state, which acted to rationalise and sustain both the external configuration of production and the forms of social relations that developed (Cooke, 1983). By failing to recognise the historical ‘realities’ of urban spaces, planning denied itself the ability to gain a true understanding of urban form and development, instead reinforcing the dominant socio-political ideology under which operated. Accordingly, for some, despite its supposedly altruistic aims and objective approach, it was “in the fullest sense of the word an ideology” (Scott, 1980, p238).

6.4.2 Unrealistic and Un-testable: The Problem with ‘Homo Economicus’

The demise of spatial science marked a significant paradigmatic shift away from positivism and towards a more socially focused body of geographical inquiry. In doing so, it ended the extensive body of research that sought to understand the spatial pattern of retail activity based upon the principles of Central Place Theory and various other economic and mathematical models of retail location. Interestingly, however, while the broader demise of spatial science accelerated the rejection of ideas associated with these theories, there had actually been underlying concerns regarding the validity of such approaches since as far back as the 1960s.

During the mid-1960s, questions had been asked regarding the empirical robustness of models of the spatial pattern of retail centres, as there were often significant differences between the observed and expected patterns of land use. For many critics, the issue with these models was that they tended to make erroneous assumptions regarding the behaviours of both consumers and retailers. As most assumed that the objective aim of all producers and consumers was to maximise utility, they held that consumer behaviour was inherently based upon the principle of distance minimisation. In models such as Central Place Theory, this distance minimisation principle manifested itself as a presumption that consumers would always patronise the nearest centre that held the specific good they wanted. Numerous geographers, however, pointed out that this presumption was not inherently true, because consumers tended to weigh the advantages and disadvantage of centre size and distance against one another when deciding where to shop (see for example: Clark, 1967, 1968; Johnston, 1966; Rushton, 1971). While these critics did not reject the idea that there was an inherent order to consumer behaviour, they did emphasise that the decision to patronise a given centre was dependent upon its attractiveness to the consumer as a whole. As such, they argued that in order to accurately determine the spatial pattern of retail activity, there was a need to factor in so called ‘preference structures’, which represented the preferences that consumers had for shopping at a given location based upon its size, distance and number of functions (Rushton, 1971).

The need to adapt economic models to account for variations in consumer behaviour saw many geographers turn to ‘Spatial Interaction Theory’, which had developed as an extension of earlier gravitational modelling, and was considerably more flexible than many existing approaches. One of its main strengths was that it could be easily disaggregated to reflect behavioural variations that were a result of the differential characteristics of consumers (e.g. socio-economic status) or the goods they were buying (e.g. convenience or comparison) (Bucklin, 1971; Thomas, 1976). Attempts to adapt the theoretical modelling of retail location to account for variations in consumer behaviour were soon widespread (see for example: Clark and Rushton, 1970; Davies, 1968; Huff, 1963; Rushton, Golledge and Clark, 1967; Rushton, 1969, 1971). However, these adaptations were themselves criticised for their failure to acknowledge external constraints on consumer behaviour, which was attributed to

their tendency to isolate the decision making process from wider social and cultural influences (Eyles, 1971; Pirie, 1976). The issue was that despite attempts to make the models more accurate, they continued to adhere to the underlying principles of spatial science, namely its deductive approach and normative philosophy (Jensen-Butler, 1972), which resulted in models that were empirically un-testable in the real world (Bursink, 1981; Webber, 1971). At the same time, while newer models discarded many of the economic assumptions of earlier theories most continued to be heavily influenced by the principles of 'Rational Choice Theory'. As a result, by the 1970s, there were increasing calls for studies of consumer behaviour in geography to become more reflective of the realities of human decision making, by factoring in psychological and cognitive influences.

6.4.3 Behavioural Economics and the Geography of Consumer Behaviour

In response to calls for a new way of understanding consumer behaviour, a new sub-disciplinary area of study soon emerged, known as behavioural geography. The rise of behavioural geography followed on from the earlier emergence of behavioural economics in the 1950s, which was concerned with studying the effect of psychological and cognitive influences on economic decision-making behaviour. In 1955, economist Herbert Simon had argued that economics needed to consider how the actual decisions taken by people differed from predictive modelling, which supposed that human decision-making behaviour was rational. He argued that the ability of people to make rational choices was limited by their own 'computational capabilities', as well as the complexity of the task at hand and the length of time in which to make a decision – a phenomenon he termed 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1955). Simon suggested that in reality, decision making was partly determined by short-hand rules known as 'heuristics' and that, as a result, standard normative economic models could not accurately predict real behaviours (Simon, 1955; 1956; 1979). He also argued that when individuals did not have the capability to determine the optimal solution to a problem, they would instead settle for a solution that was acceptable, a strategy he termed 'satisficing' (Simon, 1955; 1956). Simon's work soon came to influence behavioural geographers who were seeking to develop a better understanding of human behaviours across space. Arguably, the most notable development of Simon's ideas in geography was the work of Allan Pred (1967,

1969), who developed a behavioural matrix of locational decision making that was intrinsically based upon the principles of bounded rationality and satisficing behaviour. For Pred, locational decision-making was inherently limited by both the availability of information and the ability of the decision maker to use information effectively. Accordingly, he proposed that the more information a person had and the better their ability to use that information, the closer their decision would be to the optimal choice.

The rise of behavioural geography in the 1970s reflected an underlying concern regarding the reliability of the “unrealistic and seemingly unsubstantiated assumptions” of neoclassical models (Brown, 1992, p93). While many behavioural geographers continued to focus on developing generalisable laws of behaviour in common with spatial scientists before them, they rejected their deductive and normative methodology in favour of an inductive, micro-scale approach (Brown, 1992). Broadly speaking, research at this time could be split into one of two different approaches: empirical behavioural studies and cognitive behavioural studies. Empirical behavioural studies focused upon the empirical analysis of shopper behaviour within differing retail environments (Bishop, 1975; Davies, 1973; Davies and Bennison, 1978a, 1978b; Foot, 1988; Meyer, 1977; Thomas and Bromley, 1987; Thompson and Hart, 1968; Yuill, 1967). Despite the wide-ranging focus of studies in this area, there were many consistent findings, including that the presence of an anchor or ‘magnet’ tenant acted as a significant draw for consumers; that the entry and exit locations of retail centres affected circulation patterns; and that consumers tended to patronise similar stores within the same shopping visit. Many studies also showed that while there were distinct similarities in shopping behaviour, there were also significant variations depending upon factors such as time of day or type of consumer (Brown, 1992). Similarly, it was shown that external factors such as transportation availability and place of work also had a significant impact upon the nature of consumer behaviour (Shepherd and Thomas, 1980).

Cognitive behavioural studies, by comparison, were more rooted in the psychology of consumer behaviour, seeking to answer the how and why questions that the empirical studies overlooked (Andreasen, 1965; Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1986; Golledge and Brown, 1967; Howard and Sheth, 1969; Parker, 1976; Potter,

1982; Smith, 1988). While these studies did acknowledge that certain behaviours were habitual, they tended to emphasise the fact that consumers made conscious and deliberate choices, albeit based upon imperfect information. Accordingly, cognitive behavioural studies viewed decision making as the outcome of a variety of psychological influences, including the aims, attitudes and assessments of the consumer. However, as consumer knowledge is always imperfect – what Simon had termed bounded rationality – these decisions were not made in regard of the opportunities as they were in reality, but rather as they were perceived by the decision maker.

6.5 The Emergent Split between Retail Planning Theory and Practice

While the growth of behavioural geography reflected a widespread belief that understanding the psychological and cognitive influences of consumers was a necessary prerequisite to understanding the spatial form of urban environments, it was more broadly a reflection of the increasing dissatisfaction that many geographers had with the theoretical explanations that had been provided by the predominantly neo-classical modelling of spatial science. However, as studies of consumer behaviour were themselves limited in focus, attempts to understand the wider processes that shaped urban form increasingly turned towards structuralism, as a way to help explain how human behaviours were intrinsically shaped by their interrelationships with the wider structures of society. For proponents, structuralism was inherently attractive because it acknowledged that the decision-making behaviour of any consumer or retail firm was constrained by a variety of forces, including both policy makers and planners, who served as controllers of space. In this sense, the pattern of spatial activity that was seen in towns and cities did not reflect the true outcome of the free market, as proposed by neo-classical modelling, nor did it reflect the ‘unconstrained’ spatial choices of consumers and retailers, as proposed by behavioural geographers; instead it was seen to reflect the ‘unseen’ hand that guided and controlled patterns of urban development (Brown, 1992). The recognition that the location of commercial, industrial and residential activities was determined by a variety of differing economic, social and political forces ultimately precipitated a broader shift towards structuralism in geography during the 1980s, as it provided an effective framework for understanding a variety of different spatial

phenomena (Johnston, 1986, 1991). For advocates, the study of spatial patterns could not be explained by studying the spatial patterns themselves, but rather by analysing and understanding the socio-economic and political forces that underpinned them.

While the approaches of Marxist geographers made significant strides in revolutionising the analysis of spatial structures in many areas of geography, retailing remained largely untouched. While there were some limited attempts to offer a more 'radical' interpretation of retail activity (Ducatel and Blomley, 1990; Wrigley, 1988), the geography of retailing in general was largely unaffected by Marxist theory. One likely reason for this was the established tradition of retail geographers using applied research techniques, such as market-area analysis, in the study of retail location, as well as the broader roots of much retailing research in marketing, business and management theory (Brown, 1992; Shepherd and Thomas, 1980). Nevertheless, while the rise of Marxist geography and structuralism may not have led to an overthrow of the traditional approach of studies in retail geography, it did widen the scope of much research, which now factored in a wide range of considerations including the locational strategies of retail organisations, the retail development industry, and the policies of both central and local government.

By the 1980s, the study of retail location had moved on from both the neo-classical theoretical approaches that had predominated during the 1950s and 1960s and the behavioural approaches that predominated during the 1970s. While the work of Christaller and others continued to be regarded as having made a seminal contribution to the understanding of urban form and the location of retail activity, the largely abstract theorisations of neo-classical modelling all but faded from the mainstream of research in this area. Instead, research into retailing became disparate, covering a multitude of differing specialisations, from highly complex studies of consumer behaviour and preferences using game theory, through marketing and management theory, supply-chain and logistics, to studies of the internalisation of retail and the rise of global behemoths such as Wal-Mart, Carrefour and Costco. Accordingly, research switched from modelling the spatial pattern of retail, to monitoring the process of spatial and organisational change. In this sense, research became less theoretical and more pragmatic, focussing on the trends, patterns and forecasting of retail change (Davies and Kirby, 1983). Similarly, retail was no longer

viewed solely in economic terms and more focus was given to wider social and cultural dynamics, such as the impact of changing transport use, the cost of energy and emerging new technology. This subsequently led to new areas of study such as the geography of consumption, which was concerned with understanding how broader social and cultural forces shape patterns, behaviours and the meanings of various different forms of commodity consumption. As a result, by the beginning of the 1980s, a defined split was appearing between contemporary research into retail location, and the underlying principles of planning practice, which continued to be based upon traditional economic theory.

6.6 The Demise of the Post-War Planning Ideal

By the end of the 1970s, it was clear that the positivist traditions of spatial science were no longer in vogue in geography and, accordingly, there was a paradigmatic shift towards structuralism and Marxist theory. In such an environment, the analysis provided by the 1977 inner cities white paper should have found a receptive audience, as its broader focus on social and economic regeneration reflected a new acceptance of the structural causes of poverty and deprivation. However, the reality was that by the time the white paper was published it was already too late, with the once unifying ideal of state planning now serving as an increasingly divisive point of contention in Westminster. To many commentators, planning was in a state of 'atrophy' (Rushman et al., 1976), lacking a clear direction and with the post-war enthusiasm and idealistic spirit having now given way to disillusionment and frustration. For critics, state intervention was to blame and no manner of reform was going to resolve the underlying problem: that the planning system was overly bureaucratic, was riddled with excessive regulation and was being managed by inefficient local authorities. Whereas previous criticism had tended to focus upon the need for planning to change and adapt, by the late-1970s, discussion increasingly switched to the much more fundamental issue of whether too much emphasis, as a whole, was being placed upon planning. The question now was not whether or not planners were using their powers effectively, but whether or not planners actually had too much power.

By the end of the decade, it seemed as though a perfect storm of factors were conspiring against planning (Allison, 1986): its fundamental failure to rectify the

numerous urban and social problems that blighted towns and cities; the growth of mainstream support for the traditionally fringe doctrine of the New Right; and the underlying weakness of the British economy, which seemed to stumble from one crisis into another. Attempts at union reform had led to large-scale strikes in the early-1970s and despite the imposition of a 3-day week in 1974 and an IMF bailout in 1976, the economy was beset by high inflation and falling productivity (Leach, Coxall and Robins, 2011). When further spending controls resulted in the Winter of Discontent in 1978, it precipitated the collapse of the government, ultimately ushering in a disparate new era in Britain. Just as planning was beginning to address its lack of social focus, and just as retail planning was beginning to address the issues associated with the rapid growth of Britain's consumer society, the political foundation of the country was about to be completely shaken to the core. Planning would never be the same again.

6.7 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the evolution of retail and retail planning policy in Britain in the 1970s, a period of great instability during which the country struggled to address a plethora of economic and social issues. In doing so, it has been shown that continuing pressure for out-of-centre retail development ultimately led to the first ever piece of standalone retail planning guidance. While this new guidance elevated retail within wider planning practice, it fundamentally failed to address the issue of how planners should look to deal with proposals for new retail development and, as a result, led to planners maintaining their existing town-centre-first stance. It has also been shown that by the latter part of the decade, the widespread criticism of spatial science and its underlying positivist approach, ultimately led to its demise in geographical inquiry. However, the theoretical and conceptual principles that underpinned retail planning were able to endure at this time, in part because planning practice had increasingly diverged from academia, but also because there was a lack of impetus for change. In this sense, despite an acceleration of retail decentralisation during the 1970s and despite the widespread rejection of traditional theoretical and conceptual models of retail location, town-centre-first was able to reinforce its position as the dominant approach in retail planning.

7 RETAIL PLANNING IN THE 1980s: THE LIBERALISATION OF RETAIL DEVELOPMENT

7.1 Introduction

In the 1980s, planning in Britain underwent arguably its most significant period of change since the end of the Second World War, as it battled against the rise of a new ideological position in government, which held that it was the responsibility of the private sector to lead in regenerating and redeveloping Britain's town and cities. The following chapter explores this period of change, focussing specifically upon how the retail environment in Britain was profoundly affected by a new, more liberalised planning environment, which ultimately led to significant conflict and confusion regarding the role and function of planning. The chapter begins by examining the immediate impacts that were felt following the election of a new government in 1979 (section 7.2) and the subsequent reforms of planning that followed (section 7.3). It then moves on to explore how retail decentralisation was able to rapidly accelerate in this new, more liberalised climate (section 7.4), before concluding with an examination of how the response of planners to such a threat was increasingly undermined by the actions of the government (section 7.5).

7.2 Margaret Thatcher and the Neo-Liberalisation of Britain

In the three decades following on from the end of the Second World War, divisions and differences in opinion between the major political parties in Britain had been overcome by shared set of common goals, notably, full employment, a belief in the benefits of a mixed economy and the need for welfare reform. By the 1970s, however, this consensus was beginning to collapse, due to the continuing poor economic performance of the country, as well as a continuation of urban and social problems that blighted Britain's towns and cities. Critics of the 'middle way' had long voiced their opinion that the government's approach to dealing with the economy was too hands on, arguing that it would be more efficient if the country returned to the principles of free market economics and classical liberalism. Proponents of such a move, who came to be known as the New Right, favoured a reduced role for the state and a shift from fiscal to monetarist policy. When the Conservative Party won the 1979 general election under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, who was a prominent supporter of the New Right, it ended over three decades of consensus in British politics.

The Conservative victory came on the back of three key principles: the state was too powerful, that lowering taxes would help promote growth and that people should be rewarded for hard work (Vincent, 1987). The general opinion was that for too long the government had sacrificed long term objectives for short term gains, constantly patching up problems rather than fixing them (Kavanagh, 1987). The cause, according to critics, was the overburdening role of the state, which through high taxation, subsidisation and government spending, was stifling private enterprise. In addition, the creation of the welfare state had acted to dis-incentivise work and create a culture of dependency. For the new government the position was clear: the private sector could run Britain far more efficiently than the public sector (Thornley, 1993) and, as such, there was a need to return to deregulated free market capitalism, strength in law and order and tight monetary control.

Under Thatcher, a new philosophy came to dominate government policy in Britain, with the party seeking to move away from state intervention in order to help liberalise Britain's economy. This doctrine, which came to be referred to as 'Thatcherism', rejected the three pillars of post-war social democracy – Fordism,

Welfarism and Keynesianism (Gaffikin and Wart, 1993) – championing instead the ideals of neo-liberalism and the free-market. For the government, there was a desire to open up the British economy to international market competition, in order that the inefficient practices of traditional industry be replaced by new production processes that were both more flexible and technologically advanced (Martin, 1986). Accordingly, the foundations of state planning were quickly dismantled, through a process of deregulation and privatisation, while the government sought to shift economic policy away from Keynesianism through a programme of tax-cuts and deficit spending. As a result, the ideals of corporatism and collectivism, which for so long had dominated political thinking in Britain, increasingly gave way to the values of individualism.

In order to achieve their objectives, the government pushed ahead with a series of major political and economic reforms, through which it was hoped strong growth could be returned to Britain. Key industries were privatised, financial markets were deregulated and the trade unions were defeated following a series of strikes in 1984-85. The general pattern of change was one which saw the role of the government increasingly move away from delivery of services towards the management of policy, with the process of decision making in the public sector becoming increasingly centralised (Cherry, 1996). Accordingly, local authorities, who had had their powers and resources significantly scaled back, were expected to shift from the role of local government to local governance, with private enterprise taking on a greater responsibility for the provision of public services (Tallon, 2010).

7.3 The Liberalisation of Planning in Britain

With a new neo-liberal ideology leading to sweeping changes in the political and economic landscape of Britain, it wasn't long before the government turned their attention towards the issue of urban regeneration and the broader remit of town planning. Under Thatcher's leadership, the government came to hold that it was the role of private enterprise to lead development in Britain and that the current planning system needed simplifying in order to better promote economic growth. They believed that planning was out of touch with the needs of the private sector and that local authorities had become too idealistic and inflexible, with the common

perception being that planning was “a brake on much-needed development” (Grant, 1992, p8).

Underpinning the view that the planning system needed reform was an inherent belief that the free market would be able to resolve urban issues in a far more efficient and equitable manner than the state (Nevin, Loftman and Beazley, 1997). The government also felt that the most efficient way to resolve urban and social problems was to focus on promoting economic regeneration, because once the underlying economic issues had been resolved, the trickle-down and multiplier effects would soon spread and permeate the benefits throughout society. Accordingly, the government sought to shift the emphasis of regeneration away from the traditions of state-led town planning, towards private sector-led urban entrepreneurialism (Barnekov, Boyle and Rich, 1989; Barnes and Campbell, 1988; Deakin and Edwards, 1993). In accordance with this view, the government in 1980 introduced a new Local Government, Planning and Land Act, which sought to streamline the planning system by simplifying the process of creating local and structure plans. At the same time, the government also sought to reform existing housing policies through the passing of a new Housing Act, 1980. Admittedly, not all attempts to reduce restrictions on developers ultimately came to fruition. Attempts in 1983 to deregulate green belt controls in order to allow for more development around major towns and cities met with fierce opposition. Ironically, those areas most at risk from a removal of green belt controls were the rural and semi-rural Conservative heartlands and, as opposition grew, so the impetus for a relaxation of green belt controls very quickly disappeared.

Central to the government’s desire to bring about lasting economic and urban regeneration in Britain’s towns and cities was a belief that it was the private sector and not the state that should be the driving force behind urban development. As such, the role of the state was to act as a facilitator, attracting and supporting private enterprise, but without unduly influencing their decisions and, as a result, the emphasis of urban policy under the new Conservative government was very much based upon the idea of public-private partnership (Harding, 1990, 1991). Accordingly, during the early-1980s a raft of new urban policy initiatives were introduced in this vein, including Urban Development Grants, Derelict Land Grants,

Housing Action Trusts, Training and Enterprise Councils and Inner City Enterprise Schemes. However, there were two initiatives, in particular, that encapsulated the neo-liberal partnership ideals that underpinned urban policy at this time: Enterprise Zones and Urban Development Corporations. Enterprise Zones had a relatively narrow focus and sought to incentivise private capital investment and development in areas of low demand, through the removal of regulatory barriers and financial burdens. The belief was that by reducing regulatory controls relating to planning, employment, welfare and pollution, and by reducing the financial burdens associated with taxation and capital expenditure, otherwise unattractive areas could be made attractive to business investors (Butler, 1982; Pacione, 2009). Urban Development Corporations were tasked with bringing derelict land back into use, through infrastructural and aesthetic improvements, the provision of housing and social facilities, and the subsequent attraction of private capital investment (Imrie and Thomas, 1999; Oc and Tiesdell, 1992).

Despite the rhetoric for change, there was actually very little change in the legislative structure of the planning system itself. The prevailing approach of the government focussed on simply bypassing the complexities of the system, rather than addressing them directly. As a result, the system remained uncoordinated, with significant conflict between local authorities and central government and various different policy initiatives overlapping and competing with one another (Audit Commission, 1989; Johnstone and Whitehead, 2004). Despite the government's clear displeasure with the way planning had operated in the past, it appeared that they lacked a clear and coherent vision over how planning should work, the result of which was that policy became focused on ways to remove or bypass planning restrictions rather than actually rectifying issues in the planning system (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006). Accordingly, the government took a decidedly pro-development stance and, through various policy measures, sought to diminish the ability of local planning authorities to control urban development. In such an environment, the development of new forms of retail space was able to flourish and planners, it seemed, could do nothing to stop it.

7.4 Regional Shopping Centres and the Third Wave of Decentralisation

The liberalisation of planning in Britain could not have come at a better time for retail developers, who were eager to take advantage of growing retail expenditure, as the country began to recover from a period of recession during the early 1980s. During the preceding decades, the prevailing approach of planning had been to limit the amount of out-of-centre retail development, evident in the fact that between 1965 and 1980 over 80% of all new shopping centres were located in town centres (Bennison and Davies, 1980). Following the property market crash of the mid-1970s, however, development of new retail space in town centres had stalled, which put them under considerable pressure, as many now lacked the required retail space to meet demand. At the same time, the growing trend for non-retail services to locate themselves within retail premises, starting first with building societies and estate agents before spreading to other areas such as fast food and amusement outlets, created an additional pressure for central areas (Dawson, 1988a; Kirby and Holf, 1986). The net result was that during the 1980s, retail firms and developers once more began to focus upon the development of new retail space outside of the town centre.

7.4.1 From Retail Warehouses to Retail Parks

Much like in the preceding decade, the process of decentralisation during the 1980s was primarily driven by grocery retailers developing superstores in suburban locations, and bulky goods retailers developing retail warehouses outside of the town centre. In previous years, the position of planners towards these new retail forms had been largely cautionary, with the prevailing approach being to try to restrict out-of-centre development and redirect it into town centres where possible. However, during the mid-1980s the pressure for out-of-centre development accelerated considerably, as major retail firms embarked upon ambitious expansion programmes, both through the development of new stores and the acquisition of rival firms. The rapid growth of firms at this time reflected the changing nature of retail more widely, which had become increasingly concentrated since the end of the Second World War. Between 1950 and 1980, the total number of retail firms fell by almost 40%, from over 580,000 to less than 350,000; however, this numerical loss of retailers was

offset by the rapid growth of chain multiples, who by 1980, accounted for almost 50% of all sales, despite only making up 19% of all retail businesses (Gayler, 1984).

The pressure for expansion within retailing was arguably most prominent in the grocery sector, with many firms increasingly shifting to a high-sales low-margin commercial strategy, which required retailers to build a greater number of larger stores in order to maximise profits. The rapid expansion of grocery firms during the mid-to-late-1980s came to be known as the 'race-for-space', which reflected that at this time, several of the major British supermarkets invested huge sums of money in acquiring prime suburban land upon which they could build new superstores (Wrigley, 1991). Despite the desire of planners to limit out-of-centre development, the need for new retail space, coupled with a more liberalised planning environment, soon resulted in a significant upsurge in the development of new grocery superstores in out-of-centre locations, and between 1977 and 1990, 556 grocery superstores opened in the United Kingdom (URPI, 1990). At the same time, there was also a shift away from previous approach to superstore development, which had attempted to keep them within district centres and between 1981 and 1987, the percentage of standalone sites rose from 25% to 58% (IGD, 1989, cited in Guy, 2007).

The development of new out-of-centre retail space was not limited to grocery superstores at this time and from the early-1980s, the development of retail warehouses also began to accelerate at a considerable pace. As with their development during the 1970s, the expansion of retail warehouses reflected a general acceptance by planners that the goods being sold would not be appropriate for town centre sites. At the same time, their smaller size and the fact that many were developed on former industrial land meant that they were generally seen as being less of a threat and, as a result, by 1988, it was estimated that there were over 1200-retail warehouses in the United Kingdom (RTPI, 1988a).

Given the greater acceptance of such schemes, it wasn't long before the initial development of single, stand-alone retail warehouses began to give way to the clustering of several warehouses in what was termed a 'retail warehouse park'. While this initial clustering of retail units occurred in what has been described as an 'accidental' manner (OXIRM, 1989), as evidence emerged of the defined economic advantages they brought, proposals for planned 'retail parks' soon began to increase

(Guy, 1994a). Unlike the ad-hoc clustering of units on retail warehouse parks, retail parks were designed to be attractive to consumers and commonly incorporated shared parking facilities, landscaped spaces and covered walkways (OXIRM, 1989). By 1990, there were over 200 retail parks across the country (BDP/OXIRM, 1994; Hillier Parker, 1991, cited in Guy, 2007), most of which were located on out-of-centre rather than out-of-town sites (Guy, 1994a). In common with retail warehouses before them, the general stance of planners towards retail parks was remarkably tolerant, although this was again, likely due to view that the goods being sold from them were not suitable for town centre sites. Accordingly, many proposals for retail park development were accepted on the expectation that they would only sell bulky comparison goods (Guy, 1998b), while others were allowed on the basis that they would bring economic and social benefits to areas that may otherwise struggle to attract investment (Ferne, Fernie and Moore, 2003).

While demand for new retail space outside of town centres grew rapidly during the 1980s, it remained that it was within town centres that the majority of new retail space was developed (BDP/OXIRM, 1994). However, unlike in previous decades where new development often involved a comprehensive renewal of the urban fabric, the tendency in the 1980s was towards smaller and less obtrusive schemes, reflective of the growing concern within planning regarding the need to protect and conserve architecturally or historically important buildings (RTPI, 1988a). Accordingly, while in-town shopping centre development did continue into the 1980s, many schemes tended to be smaller in scale, often being combined with wider improvements to the urban fabric, such as pedestrianisation schemes, and aesthetic and design improvements (BDP/OXIRM, 1994).

7.4.2 High Streets in the Suburbs: The Arrival of the Third Wave

By the mid-1980s, the increasing pressure for new out-of-centre retail really began to affect the spatial structuring of retail provision across Britain. While much of this was due to the more accommodating stance of planners, it was also driven by retailers and developers, who were eager to take advantage of the benefits that came with developing retail space away from town centres. Thus, it was at this time that a third wave of retail decentralisation began to emerge, which consisted of two separate, albeit interlinked trends (Schiller, 1986). At the forefront of this was the re-

emergence of an imported American retail concept, which had first been suggested in the 1960s: the out-of-town regional shopping centre. These developments offered a single sweeping solution to the problems of growing consumer demand and the shortage of viable space in town centres, promising to provide not only a vast array of retailers, but also large amounts of free parking, high quality transport links and a large selection of leisure, eating and entertainment outlets as well. In the 1960s, proposed developments of this kind had been prevented from occurring due to the resistance of planners. However, under the more liberalised planning regime of 1980s, the development of out-of-town regional shopping malls was now a more realistic proposition and by 1986, there were 26 such applications in the pipeline (BDP/OXIRM, 1994). Despite the fanfare that greeted them, the reality was that many of these proposals never really stood a chance of being built, with even the government acknowledging that the negative impacts were too great. Potential impacts on local trade, traffic congestion and the environment were all cited as reasons to reject proposals (Guy, 1994b) and by 1990, of the 57 proposals that had been made; only four were completed (BDP/OXIRM, 1994). A further five regional shopping centres were granted permission in the early-1990s, although by this time, a significant shift in the outlook of planning effectively ended any further likelihood of this type of development being allowed (Guy, 2007).

While the emergence of regional shopping centres represented the most visible component of the third wave, arguably a far more profound change to occur at this time was the emergence of so-called 'suburban high streets'. As has previously been noted, the rapid growth of retail warehouses and retail parks during the early-1980s was primarily driven by a core of retailers selling household furnishings, electrical goods and DIY products. By the mid-to-late 1980s, however, these were increasingly being joined by new retailers that sold items that were the traditional mainstay of the high street, including toys, leisure goods, motoring accessories, clothing and footwear (OXIRM, 1989). For many years, planning's resistance to out-of-centre retail development had been tempered by a recognition that the type of goods being sold there were not suitable for town centre sites. However, as the pressure for development from retailers grew, and with the government consistently overruling planning decisions, it soon became apparent that the ability of planners to control development was being severely undermined. At the same time, the lack of new

guidance meant that there was “no consistent planning policy throughout the country guiding which goods may be sold in out-of-centre locations” (RTPI, 1988a, para 5.22). Accordingly, the practice of planners in the late-1970s and early-1980s of seeking to impose developmental restrictions on new suburban retail sites soon gave way to the increasing practice of issuing planning permission under the conditions of what was termed open consent (Guy, 1998b). What this meant was that by the end of the 1980s, there were an increasing number of out-of-centre and out-of-town retail destinations that had no practical limitations on the type of retail use that occupied them. While such a decision may have seemed counterintuitive given the general stance of planning, part of the issue was that during the early-to-mid-1980s, there had never been any real expectation that high street-style stores would be interested in locating on suburban retail parks (Guy, 1998b). This all changed in 1985, when Marks & Spencer announced plans to open an out-of-town store within the newly built MetroCentre development in Gateshead, a decision that sent shockwaves throughout the planning system. High street retailers were not only enthusiastic about the opportunities afforded by developments outside of town centres, but were also serious about locating there too (Ferne, Fernie and Moore, 2003; Schiller, 1994; Whysall, 1985).

By the end of the 1980s, the growth of retail spaces outside of the traditional retailing hierarchy had now reached record levels, and many planning authorities became concerned about the pronounced impact that this was starting to have upon town centres. A small reprieve to the rapid pace of change was finally offered towards the end of the decade, as the country once again slipped into recession. As a result, proposals for new development slowed, as retailers and developers reacted to concerns over the potential for market saturation in some areas, which when combined with high interest rates, acted to deter speculative property development (Wrigley, 1994). Nevertheless, there remained a real concern that not enough was being done by central government to help protect town centres from the threat posed by new forms of retail development. From its early incarnation of being driven almost entirely by grocery retailers, retail decentralisation was now affecting the whole retail sector and critically was threatening to erode and destabilise the traditional hierarchical structure of retail in Britain.

7.5 Conflict and Confusion: Retail Planning in the 1980s

In the more liberalised planning era of the 1980s, there was a fundamental shift in the way the government expected planning decisions to be made. Unlike in previous decades, where the onus had been on property developers and retailers having to justify why a decision *should be* allowed, it was now expected that local planning authorities had to justify why a decision *should not be* allowed (Guy, 2007). While such a distinction may have appeared to be a simple matter of semantics, the reality was that it reflected a change in the government's stance towards an automatic "presumption in favour of allowing applications for development... unless that development would cause demonstrable harm to interests of acknowledged importance" (DoE, 1988a, para 15). For planners, this created a particular challenge in terms of retail, because just as the demand for new retail space was booming once more, the government was acting to undermine their ability to control where development took place.

7.5.1 Conflict, Confusion and the Lack of Guidance in Retail Planning

Despite the government's liberal planning stance, no new guidance relating specifically to retail development was actually produced in the early 1980s, with an updated version of DCPN13 produced in 1977, remaining the most up-to-date guidance. As a result, many felt that planners were being abandoned by central government, at a time when the retail sector was undergoing a profound process of change (Wade, 1985). The general tendency at this time was for planners to revert to older guidance regarding the form and function of the built retail environment (Burt, Dawson and Sparks, 1983) and, perhaps unsurprisingly, this adherence to traditional principles was criticised by many in the private sector, who felt it was overly restrictive and inflexible, and did not take into account the nature of change in retailing (ORG, 1989 cited in Guy, 2007).

The government's decision not to replace existing guidance with updated information arguably reflected their preference for simply bypassing the problematic elements of the planning system, rather than fixing them. As a result, rather than producing new guidance that set out in clear terms exactly how they thought planning should operate, they chose to drip-feed planning guidance through a series of ministerial statements and one-off paragraphs in other policy documentation. The

problem for planners was that this piecemeal approach did not actually add anything new to what was already known. Accordingly, planners and developers were left to interpret the government's actual position by assessing their decisions in past planning appeals, effectively establishing a kind of 'case-law' precedent (Guy, 2007). Evidence at the time suggested that the government were more inclined to favour developers over local authorities, with many appeals being upheld on the basis that the local authority did not provide evidence to justify their grounds for their opposition (Rees, 1987). Critically, whereas in previous years planners were able to reject applications based upon non-conformity with a development plan, in the new planning climate, such a justification was no longer valid, with the government effectively downgrading development plans to the status of a material consideration. As development plans had in the past been the primary determinant of planning decisions, this now meant that local authorities were less able to maintain control over the nature and location of new retail spaces and unsurprisingly, many local authorities began accepting planning applications for new development that they would have rejected in previous years (Davies and Sparks, 1989).

The greater support for private-sector development afforded by the government during the 1980s precipitated a rise in the number of successful planning appeals that were made (Guy, 2007). As noted previously, many appeals were successfully upheld because local planning authorities failed to justify adequately why the negative impacts of a proposed scheme outweighed the positives. At the same time, the generalised presumption in favour of development meant that if a developer could illustrate need or demand for a new development, then the government would find in their favour, so long as the negative impacts were not excessive (Whysall, 1985). Of course, this did not mean that all appeals were successful. Many were rejected, with common reasons being the need to protect greenbelt land, the need to preserve land for an alternative use or the potential for severe negative impacts on existing retail centres (Lee Donaldson, 1987; 1991 cited in Guy, 2007). Nevertheless, it remained that the government were now far more willing to overrule decisions being made by local authorities and accordingly, this furthered the inherent confusion of planners, who still lacked any clear guidance regarding the exact manner in which they should assess planning proposals.

7.5.2 The Arrival of PPG6: New Policy, New Approach

In January of 1988, the government finally released new guidance concerning retail planning in England and Wales with the publication of *Planning Policy Guidance Note 6: Major Retail Development* (PPG6). As with previous policy guidance, PPG6 was relatively short and provided little specific information on how local authorities should look to assess proposals for new retail development. In fact, the document explicitly stated, “the government has no intention of identifying specific locations suitable for major retail developments or for different types of retailing” (DoE, 1988b, para 3). At the same time, it once again reiterated that planning should not act to inhibit competition and that, as such, “the possible effects of a proposed major retail development on existing retailers is not in this sense a relevant factor in deciding planning applications and appeals” (DoE, 1988b, para 7). While the document did advise that planners needed to maintain access to retail for less mobile groups, it did not specify that this should be done through the protection of the existing retail provision, but rather that “where possible, large new stores... should be located where they can serve not only car-borne shoppers but also those who rely on other forms of transport (DoE, 1988b, para 6).

The prevailing message within PPG6 was that local authorities needed to accept that there was need for new retail development and that, given the prescribed advantages of out-of-centre development; grocery superstores, retail warehouses and retail parks all had a role to play. It did caution that the potential long terms impacts of new development on town centres should be considered, but only in ‘exceptional circumstances’, where the cumulative impacts of multiple developments could become an issue. Accordingly, it was suggested that the existing practice of performing detailed assessments of expected retail growth should be discontinued, while the tendency to impose rigid floorspace limits within development plans should also be scrapped. The central message seemed to be that planners should look to avoid doing anything that could prevent developers and retailers from “[responding] to changing market conditions and the demands of customers” (DoE, 1988b, para 8).

While the content of PPG6 was largely limited to rehashing what many planners already understood as the government’s position, one of the more notable inclusions

was its reference to the importance of protecting the ‘vitality’ and ‘viability’ of town centres. In cautioning against too much new out-of-centre development, the guidance stated that planners should “consider whether [developments] are on such a scale and of a kind that could seriously affect the vitality and viability of a nearby town centre as a whole” (DoE, 1988b, para 7). Of course this seemingly alarmist statement was tempered with a suggestion that out-of-centre development could actually help town centres, by relieving them of traffic congestion associated with larger store developments. It was also suggested that town centres could benefit from having a variety of differing shopping activities, as well as other town centre uses and that planners needed to accept that change was a natural part of the evolution of town centres.

The response of planners and local authorities to the publication of PPG6 was one of concern, with many critical of the way in which it elevated commercial interests above the population at large (Davies and Howard, 1989; RTPI, 1988b). Not only was there a belief that it did not provide adequate guidance to planners, but there was also a view that what guidance it did provide, downplayed the potential impacts of new retail development and the subsequent consideration that should be given to them in the planning process. In general, there was a feeling that PPG6 acted to further undermine and weaken the role and function of retail planning, making it harder to oppose development proposals because of trading impacts or floor space concerns. The issue of town centre decline, which was becoming an increasing problem in many areas, was also seen to be not adequately addressed, while the guidance was criticised for failing to define what was actually meant by vitality and viability, let alone how they could be achieved. In light of the government’s vague position and recognising the significant pressures that the planning system was facing, the Royal Town Planning Institute produced a report, which provided a series of recommendations for local authorities to consider in updating their local and structure plans (RTPI, 1988a). The report emphasised that there was a need for local authorities to accept that some new retail development in out-of-centre locations would be required, but that it was critical that this occurred within an established framework that accounted for existing retail locations and the demands and needs of the consumer. It also suggested that it was important to continue using development

plans as part of a prescriptive approach to planning, in spite of the government advocating a more flexible and pro-market planning system.

7.5.3 The Legacy of Retail Planning in the 1980s

The 1980s has been characterised as a 'free-for-all' era in retail planning (Guy, 2007), in which the principles of protecting the retail hierarchy were abandoned in favour of a pro-enterprise stance that gave developers and retailers greater freedom to develop new stores in locations that accorded with their own preferences. It was also an era characterised by significant conflict and confusion, with local authorities and central government having decidedly differing opinions regarding what exactly the role of planning was. After decades of state-led planning, the emphasis now shifted towards the private sector leading development, with the government seeking to change the stance of the planning system to one that presumed in favour of development. Planning reform during the early part of the decade effectively sought to dismantle the practice of strategic planning, which for so long had served as the primary means through which planners were able to control where new retail development occurred. When this was combined with the government's willingness to overrule local authority decisions in planning appeals, it effectively acted to weaken the power of local authority planners, rendering them largely helpless to control the nature and location of development.

For all that changed in the liberalised era of 1980s planning, perhaps the most significant legacy was actually how it led to the establishment of some of the cornerstones of what would become a more town-centre orientated approach to retail development in the 1990s. The unwillingness of central government to offer protection to town centres against new out-of-centre retail developments became one of the main catalysts for the emergence of town centre management in Britain, with local authorities placing greater emphasis on issues that were important to consumers, such as aesthetic design, built quality, and attractive shopping streets (Jones, 1989). At the same time, the success of major retail-led regeneration schemes such as Meadowhall in Sheffield and the MetroCentre in Gateshead, illustrated the potential power of retail as a force through which the regeneration of declining areas could be achieved. Perhaps most notably of all, it was through PPG6 that the concepts of 'vitality' and 'viability' were introduced into policy guidance; two

seemingly innocuous terms that would soon form a cornerstone of retail planning policy in England.

7.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the evolution of retail and retail planning policy in Britain during the 1980s, a period during which neo-liberalism came to dominate the thinking of government. In doing so, it has been shown that the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in 1979 fundamentally shifted the stance of the government concerning the issues of both state intervention and town planning. Under Thatcher's governance, the private sector was expected to lead urban regeneration and redevelopment, and accordingly, planners were expected to act as facilitators in a more liberalised and deregulated planning system. As a result, the ability of planners to control new retail development was severely inhibited, which resulted in a rapid acceleration of retail decentralisation at this time. Nonetheless, the lack of statutory reform in planning, coupled with the unwillingness of government to publish new retail planning guidance, enabled planners to maintain unified support for town centres and the retail hierarchy. In this sense, even though their ability to control development was limited, the now deeply embedded ideological and conceptual principles that underpinned retail planning, enabled planners to maintain a strong 'passive' resistance to new ideas, which ultimately meant that town centres continued to be viewed as the preferred location of new retail development.

8 RETAIL PLANNING IN THE 1990s: THE RETURN OF REGULATORY CONTROL

8.1 Introduction

In the 1990s, the overarching stance of town planning shifted once more, as the principles of deregulation and liberalisation were slowly reined in. What emerged instead was a new emphasis on the concept of sustainability, which provided the requisite climate for a return to regulatory control in retail planning. The following chapter explores the evolution of retail and retail planning during this time, focussing specifically on the arrival of new retail planning policy guidance and the impact that this had on the development of new retail space. The chapter begins by examining how the concept of sustainability came to redefine the expectations of planning during the early 1990s (section 8.2), before considering how urban policy changed in response to its perceived failures in the decade before (section 8.3). It then moves on to examine how new planning guidance for retail, actively reinforced the principles of regulatory control, ultimately establishing what would become known as the ‘town-centre-first’ approach (section 8.4). The chapter concludes with an assessment of how the nature of new retail development began to shift following the publication of new guidance, as retailers increasingly began to accept the new planning climate in which they were operating (section 8.5).

8.2 From Liberalised to Sustainable Planning

By the end of the 1980s, political support for Margaret Thatcher had waned significantly, in part because of the country's declining economic performance, but also because of increasing divisions within the Conservative party on issues such as European integration. Despite surviving a leadership challenge in 1989, Thatcher's position soon became untenable, and the Prime Minister was eventually forced to step down in November 1990. Notwithstanding the rather un-ceremonial way in which she ended up leaving power, there was no doubt of the legacy of change that Thatcher had left. Under her leadership, the practice of widespread state intervention had ended, and through a process of deregulation and privatisation, the operations of 'big government' had been almost completely curtailed.

In regard of planning, by the end of the 1980s, the role and function of local planning had been substantially reduced; with a firm emphasis now placed upon the role of the private sector to lead and drive forward regeneration in towns and cities. However, the extent to which planning actually changed is open for debate. While it is certainly true that planning became more centralised and liberalised, it is also true that the government's fundamental objective of orientating planning towards market principles was never realised, not least because of a failure of the government's top down approach to implementation (Allmendinger and Thomas, 1998). While the government were able to make planning more conducive to the private sector, it remained the case that local planners were fundamentally opposed to the idea that financial and economic considerations should govern planning action (Campbell and Henneberry, 2005). As such, it is arguable that the liberalised approach to planning that occurred in the 1980s merely reflected a coercion of planning action on the government's part, rather than a successful attempt to convert planners to the ideals of neo-liberalism.

By the early 1990s, a new ideological discourse was beginning to permeate into the thinking of both politicians and planners, which sought to place the principles of sustainability and sustainable development at the centre of urban and rural development. These concepts had first emerged following the publication of a United Nations paper entitled *Our Common Future* in 1987, which had established that there existed environmental limits to economic growth in the developed and developing

worlds (WCED, 1987). In establishing a future vision for global development, the paper called for sustainability to be placed at the heart of all programmes of social and economic development. The paper was notable for defining the concept of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p54), which it contended would only be achieved, if the focus of development was based upon principles that included citizen participation, ecological and environmental protection and social justice.

In response to the report, the British Government published a white paper entitled *This Common Inheritance* in 1990, which established a new environmental strategy that would serve as a foundation for the economic and social development of the country until the end of the century. In it, the government set out that the protection of the environment should be placed front and centre within government policy (DoE, 1990a) and soon after its publication the government passed the Environmental Protection Act, 1990, which established the first ever piece of integrated legislation addressing the regulation and protection of the environment in Britain. Accordingly, the rise of sustainable development and environmental protection within many areas of government policy at this time necessitated a review of how the government expected the planning system to operate. In contrast to the previous decade, where the role of planning had been significantly curtailed in favour of a more deregulated and liberalised environment, the government now sought a return to greater regulatory control, both as a means to help protect the interests of the public, while also taking account of environmental concerns.

Foremost among the changes brought about in this area was the re-elevation of development plans within the planning process (Tewdwr-Jones, 1997), which was solidified in legislation through the passing of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1990 and the Planning and Compensation Act, 1991. While the government continued to emphasise that the development plan should only be taken as a starting point in the planning process, many local authority planners held that the new legislation re-established development plans as the primary determinant of decisions in the planning process, giving them the confidence once more to reject planning applications which they felt ran counter to the objectives of their wider development

plan (Guy, 2007). The centrality of sustainable development within planning was further enshrined in 1992, when an updated version of *Planning Policy Guidance Note 1: General Policy and Principles* (PPG1) was published, which stressed that effective development plans should have at their heart the objectives of economic, social and environmental sustainability (DoE, 1992). PPG1 was further updated in 1997, with a broadened remit that placed sustainability, mixed-use development and urban design at the heart of the planning system (DoE, 1997). The updated guidance returned a strong element of developmental control back to planning, stating that it was necessary in order to “provide for the nation's needs... while respecting environmental objectives” (DoE, 1997, para 5). Accordingly, PPG1 reiterated the central role that development plans played in the pursuit of sustainable development, as they were the “most effective way of reconciling the demand for development and the protection of the environment” as well as “helping to provide for necessary development in locations which do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (DoE, 1997, para 39).

By the mid-1990s, it was clear that the largely unrestrained and deregulated approach to planning that had characterised the preceding decade was no longer considered acceptable. Growing environmental concerns, coupled with a widespread acceptance that the government needed to become more cognisant of the long-term impacts of economic development, combined to create a climate in which increased regulatory control was now considered a necessity in order for town planning to operate effectively. In simple terms, although the government continued to value the important role that private sector interests played, they could no longer assume a default stance in favour of development. Instead, planning proposals needed to be carefully considered against wider social, economic and environmental considerations, with planning expected to adopt a more constrained approach.

8.3 The Era of Competitive Urban Policy

In the 1990s, the focus of urban policy shifted away from the largely state-directed and private sector-funded approach of the 1980s, towards a new approach which emphasised the principles of ‘competitive bidding’ and ‘multi-sectoral partnership’ (Bailey, 1993; Bailey, Barker and MacDonald, 1995; Oatley, 1998a). This shift largely emerged in response to the perceived failings of 1980s urban policy, which

had for the most part, failed to address underlying social problems in the most deprived parts of Britain. During this time, the government had presumed that given the right incentives to invest, the private sector would provide the most efficient and equitable method of regenerating towns and cities. This view was underpinned by a belief that the trickle-down-effect would result in the economic benefits of new development permeating into wider society; however, the reality was that such an effect never materialised, meaning that the most marginalised and excluded groups continued being bypassed by the benefits of economic growth. For many critics, the problem was the government's overt focus on property-led physical regeneration, which many contended could not provide the requisite solution to tackling deeply entrenched social issues (Turok, 1992; Imrie and Thomas, 1993).

In addition to the perceived failings of existing urban policies, there was also a belief that the existing system was inefficient, uncoordinated and costly. By the late-1980s, there were growing concerns regarding the high costs associated with many regeneration programmes and the question of whether such schemes represented value for money (Tallon, 2010). At the same time, many felt that there was a lack of coordination between various different policy initiatives, which was contributing to their inability to operate successfully (Audit Commission, 1987). The perceived failings of existing urban policy ultimately led the government to develop a new approach in the early-1990s, which was fundamentally based around two key principles that the government held were vital to successful regeneration: competition and partnership. The government contended that through programmes of 'competitive bidding', urban policy could tap into local enthusiasm and talent, shifting the focus away from the targeting of 'need', towards the rewarding of innovation (Atkinson and Moon, 1994; Stanton, 1996). In such a system, government funding for regeneration projects would involve a competitive bidding system, where local stakeholders were encouraged to formulate inventive ways to tackle decline and deprivation in their local area (Oatley, 1998a). In addition to rewarding innovation, the government would also reward those proposals built upon multi-sectoral partnerships that included stakeholders from the public and private sectors, as well as voluntary and community groups.

Under the guise of this new competitive bidding and partnership based system, two flagship urban policy programmes subsequently emerged in the 1990s: City Challenge and the Single Regeneration Budget. The City Challenge initiative was launched in May 1991, largely in response to issues with the property-led approach of the previous decade (Davoudi, 1995). Local bids for regeneration funding were submitted to the government, who assessed them based on a series of criteria, which included the benefits to the local community; the creation of long-term, multi-level partnership; improvements to quality of life; and the stimulation of additional private sector investment (Oatley and Lambert, 1998). The Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), which was launched in 1994, sought to address the fundamental lack of coordination that was seen to have inhibited many policy programmes in the previous decade. The SRB brought together twenty existing policy initiatives, which had previously been administered by different government departments, into a single regeneration programme that was controlled and operated by the Department of the Environment (Oatley, 1998b; Pacione, 2007).

8.4 The Return of Development Control in Retail Planning

The focus on sustainable development and environmental protection during the early-1990s provided the ideal environment in which development control could be re-established as one of the core objectives of retail planning. As such, the largely unrestrained expansion of out-of-centre development that had predominated during the 1980s was soon brought under control, although significant amounts of new out-of-centre space were developed during this time, as a legacy of previous planning decisions. Nevertheless, during the 1990s, there was a definitive tightening of planning guidelines, with a renewed focus on protecting town and city centres.

8.4.1 A New Sustainability Agenda in Retail Planning

At the start of the 1990s, despite the fact that the 1988 version of PPG6 remained the most up to date planning guidance for retail, it was evidently clear that the government no longer viewed out-of-centre development in the same light, especially as it was now acknowledged that “out-of-town shopping can be inaccessible to the least mobile people including the old; it can lengthen car journeys; and it can sometimes threaten the town centre economy” (DoE, 1990a, p115). Instead, new

planning guidance relating to the formulation of development plans suggested that the government were now in favour of development control, which would be achieved through a re-elevation of development plans to being the primary consideration in planning decisions (DoE, 1990b).

In 1993, the government released an updated version of PPG6, entitled *Town Centres and Retail Developments*, which sought to place sustainable development at the heart of planning for retail and town centres (DoE, 1993). In the guidance, the government set out their key objectives in this area, which included the need to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres; the need to ensure accessibility to a wide range of shopping facilities for consumers; and the need to maintain an efficient and innovative retail sector. Broadly speaking, the new guidance suggested that the government were now in favour of town centres being the primary location for new retail development, as these locations were likely to be more accessible and would therefore encourage sustainable transport use. While the new guidance had a clear presumption in favour of town centre development, it was also emphasised that planners should look to promote healthy competition between retail environments, with the guidance stating that “both town centre and out-of-centre locations have distinctive roles to play in providing for new retail development” (DoE, 1993, para 21). Accordingly, it reiterated once more that planning should not get involved in competitive matters and that, as such, local planning authorities “should not refuse permission for development on the grounds of the effect on a town centre, unless there is clear evidence to suggest that the result would be to undermine the vitality and viability of that centre” (DoE, 1993, para 37). This suggested that, although the government viewed town centres as being preferential in many regards, they still maintained that there was scope for out-of-centre development as well.

Another noticeable emphasis of the new guidance was the need for town centres to diversify their offer, so that they became more attractive to visit. In considering the decline of many existing centres, PPG6 suggested that such decline was likely an outcome of these centres not meeting the required standards of consumers and businesses. In line with this, it cautioned against “attempts to go back to past patterns of use” suggesting that “vitality and viability may be found in a wider mix of uses that fits better with the surrounding community and changing retail patterns” (DoE,

1993, para 16). In this regard, it appeared that the government believed that a diversification of town centre uses was crucial to sustaining and enhancing the vitality and viability of town centres, although it was noted that “the retail function should continue to underpin such centres” (DoE, 1993, para 16, para 4) and that other uses should not be “allowed to dominate primary shopping areas in a way that undermines the retail function” (DoE, 1993, para 6).

While the new guidance helped to bring retail planning policy in line with the wider objectives of government, one issue that remained was what exactly vitality and viability were and, perhaps more importantly, how they could be measured. Recognising this, the government in 1994, released a manual on how to plan positively for town centres entitled *Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge* (DoE, 1994). The objective of the manual was to shed light on the current challenges facing town centres and to offer guidance that would enable “local authorities and others to make the most of their town and city centres” (DoE, 1994, viii). In it, the government acknowledged that the challenges facing town centres were profound, noting that they were the outcome of the country’s shift towards a service based economy, the growing use of cars, and the significant ‘dispersal’ of population and employment from towns and cities. In addressing the issue of vitality and viability, the manual noted, “vitality is reflected in how busy a centre is at different times and in different parts”, while viability “refers to the ability of the centre to attract continuing investment” (DoE, 1994, p55). In advising local authorities on how they should look to measure them, the manual stated that although there was not a specific set of indicators that should be used, two indicators should serve as the primary measures: pedestrian flow rate and rental yield. Notably, the guidance manual emphasised that the assessment of vitality and viability should not be carried out as a one off, but should instead be part of a recurring check of town centre health.

8.4.2 Putting Town Centres First: PPG6 and the Sequential Approach

On the face of it, PPG6 seemed to paint a clear picture of the government’s position on retail planning; however, it remained the case that there was significant concern regarding the future of retail in Britain, particularly as many retail environments were now in a state of decline. In 1994, the House of Commons Environment Select

Committee released a report, which looked into the future of shopping centres in Britain (House of Commons, 1994). The report noted that there was widespread concern regarding the future of many shopping centres, particularly those dating from the 1960s and 1970s, given their high vacancy levels and generally poor state of repair. In establishing the causes of this problem, the report noted that many centres had suffered from a loss of trade to out-of-centre developments and when this was combined with a lack of investment, many had become unattractive to both retailers and consumers. Accordingly, the report welcomed the new, more cautious stance of the government on retail planning matters, although it noted that clearer guidance would be necessary if local authorities were to make effective decisions. In making a series of recommendations on how policy could be further strengthened, the report recommended the introduction of a new 'sequential' test, and the requirement for out-of-centre applications to submit a retail impact study. It also suggested that an automatic 'call in' procedure for large applications not in accordance with the development plan should be introduced, as well as tighter restrictions on the types of goods that could be sold from out-of-centre locations.

One of the main issues raised by the House of Commons report was the inherent contradiction in planning guidance between its emphasis on focussing new development in town centres, and the wider suggestion that out-of-centre development should be considered acceptable, so long as it did not have a demonstrable impact upon town centres. In effect, the guidance was simultaneously suggesting that planners should look to focus new development in town centres, but also look to maintain balance in retail provision between town centre and out-of-centre based schemes. As a result, many planners expressed confusion over what exactly the stance of government was, especially as there had been a growing suggestion that the government intended to reform retail planning guidance again (Guy, 2007).

In June 1996, the government released an updated version of PPG6, which expanded significantly upon the guidance provided in 1993, while also incorporating several new aspects of retail planning policy in England (DoE, 1996). Central to the new guidance was the introduction of a sequential approach to dealing with applications for main town centre uses, whereby "first preference should be for town centre

sites... followed by edge-of-centre sites, district and local centres and only then out-of-centre sites in locations that are accessible by a choice of means of transport” (DoE, 1996, para 1.11). The introduction of the sequential approach seemed to make it clear that the government were now decidedly in favour of locating new retail development in town centres and, as such, the onus was on retailers and developers “to be more flexible about the format, design and scale of... development (DoE, 1996, para 1.12). Of course, this was once again tempered with the obligatory note that planning should not get involved in competitive matters; however, it seemed clear from the tone of updated guidance that the government would no longer support out-of-centre development that potentially threatened the vitality and viability of town centres.

The updated PPG6 guidance also established three key considerations that should be made by local planning authorities when dealing with applications for new retail development. These were the impact on the vitality and viability of nearby town centres, the issue of accessibility and need to promote development that minimised car usage. In line with these, the guidance suggested that “town and district centres should be the preferred locations for developments that attract many trips, and local planning should adopt planning policies to locate major generators of travel in existing centres” (DoE, 1996, para 1.3). As such, the new guidance not only emphasised the importance of new development being located in town centres, but that when development was allowed in out-of-centre locations, it should occur within the existing retail hierarchy. Accordingly, the guidance stated that local authorities should look to establish a hierarchy of centres within their structure plans, noting that “the development plan should indicate a range and hierarchy of centres, from city centre, through town centre, district centre to local centres and village centres, where investment in new retail and other development will be promoted and existing provision enhanced” (DoE, 1996, para 1.5). In addition to this, PPG6 also added a requirement that all retail planning proposals with a floorspace greater than 2500sqm should be required to submit an impact study, in which issues relating to accessibility, car usage and impacts on existing centres were addressed.

One of the noticeable aspects of the updated PPG6 guidance was the detail it provided to local authorities regarding how they should look to plan for new retail

development within their local development plans. In emphasising the need to develop planning strategies that supported town centres, the guidance reiterated that decisions should be made in accordance with the primary objective of sustaining and enhancing the vitality and viability of town centres, and that such vitality and viability was likely to come from town centres having a diversified offer, an attractive environment, good accessibility and continued investment. Accordingly, the role of planning was to facilitate these objectives by providing a “positive framework to encourage investment in town centres” (DoE, 1996, para 2.3), with the government pointing out that the decline of many centres stemmed from their fundamental failure to attract consumers. PPG6 suggested, therefore, that planners should look to engage with the private sector in the formulation of development plans, focusing particularly on the need for mixed-use development, high quality design and good accessibility. At the same time, in cautioning against attempts to return to past patterns of usage, the guidance reiterated that a “diversification of uses may be the best way forward” (DoE, 1996, para 2.6), noting that, although retailing should “continue to underpin such centres, it is only part of what ensures the health of town centres” (para 2.18).

8.5 Innovation and Adaptation: Retail Development in the 1990s

While the change in stance that underpinned updated retail planning guidance, reflected a shift towards the objectives of sustainability, promoting environmentally friendly development, and enhancing the vitality and viability of town centres, it was also a response to the largely unrestrained development that had occurred during the 1980s, when an acceleration of retail decentralisation had precipitated the decline of many town centres. Accordingly, as a more restrictive planning environment emerged, many retail firms began to change their approach, developing innovative new forms of retail space.

8.5.1 Grocery Superstores and Retail Parks in the 1990s

While the decline of town centres and the importance of sustainability and environmental protection were the focus of planners in the early 1990s, retailers and developers were primarily concerned with the impacts of an extended recession, which had seen levels of consumer expenditure fall and demand for new retail space

dry up. While the retail sector more widely was significantly impacted by the recession, the grocery sector seemed to be largely insulated from its effects, as demand for these goods tended to remain relatively stable (Guy, 2007). In fact, the rate of grocery store development peaked during the early years of the 1990s, when the major supermarkets were opening anywhere between 60 and 80 new stores per year (Guy, 1996). However, the major grocery retailers were soon encountering their own issues, most notably the arrival of European deep discounters such as Aldi and Netto, the continuing financial viability of new store openings (Wrigley, 1994), and the issue of store saturation (Guy, 1994c, 1996). Accordingly, demand for new retail space started to fall from the mid-1990s, and following on from the addition of the sequential test to updated PPG6 guidance in 1996, many grocery firms began to adapt their growth strategies, placing greater emphasis on the innovation of new retail formats that accorded with the government's new town-centre-first approach.

The 1990s were thus a time of significant innovation in British grocery retailing, with arguably the most notable changes coming with the emergence of several new formats of store. During the 1970s and 1980s, supermarket development had been dominated by the 'conforming superstore', which was sized at anywhere between 2500 and 5000sqm. However, in the new, more restrictive planning climate, the major grocery retailers sought to develop store formats that would not clash with the stance of planners. These included the development of smaller 'compact' superstores (<3000sqm) in market towns and semi-rural areas; the development of 'metro' stores (<1200sqm) in town and city centres; and the development of European-style 'hypermarkets' (>5000sqm), which sold not only a full grocery selection, but also a wide range of non-food items (McNair, 1999). At the same time, many grocery retailers renewed their focus upon developing town centre based superstores, as well as looking to extend existing stores, either through extensions, the addition of mezzanine levels, or the transferring of space from stockroom to sales floor (Guy, 2007). Many of the major supermarkets also made a concerted effort to broaden their non-food offering, by selling items such as household electrical goods and clothing, as well as incorporating various retail services into their stores, including pharmacies, photo shops, dry cleaners and cafes.

In contrast to grocery superstores, the development of retail warehouses and retail parks was affected by the economic downturn at the beginning of the 1990s, although the pace of new development soon picked up once the economy began to recover (CBRE, 2011). In the first half of the 1990s, planners generally continued to take a less restrictive stance on such developments, due to the underlying view that the bulky goods being sold would not be appropriate for town centres. However, following the introduction of the sequential approach in 1996, the stance of planners changed in line with town-centre-first policy and, as a result, from the mid-1990s the number of proposed schemes fell off sharply (CBRE, 2011). While the sequential approach was inherently intended to limit new out-of-centre development, it created a particular problem in terms of retail park development, because it was often a challenge to find suitable town centre sites. At the same time, the somewhat utilitarian design of retail warehouses and their functional emphasis on ease of accessibility and plentiful car parking created an issue for planners, who were often aware that such developments would not be appropriate for town centres. Accordingly, many planners began to interpret planning guidance as suggesting that retail park developments should be ‘disaggregated’, in order that they fit into town centres. This created a point of friction with retailers and developers, who felt that such an interpretation of guidance amounted to an effective ban on out-of-centre retail parks (Guy, 2007). Accordingly, some started to emphasise the regeneration benefits of proposed schemes, while others sought to develop unique formats that would be hard for local authorities to justify splitting up (Guy and Bennison, 2007).

The net result of these issues was that much demand for new retail park space went unmet during the 1990s, which had the effect of vastly increasing the rental market value of prime retail park space (Guy, 2007). In response, several site owners began to split existing large retail warehouses into smaller units, often taking advantage of the lack of restrictions or conditions attached to the original planning permission. This not only resulted in a more intensive use of space, but also made retail parks more attractive to traditional high street retailers, especially as such amendments formed part of a wider effort to improve their design and consumer offer (Guy, 1998b). Accordingly, towards the end of the 1990s, several existing retail parks began to be marketed as ‘shopping parks’ or ‘fashion parks’, with a specific focus on smaller units occupied by retail firms normally found on the high street (Guy, 1998b,

2000). The development of shopping parks was ultimately buoyed by the strong financial returns they offered and by the end of the decade; investors from property portfolios provided a major source of investment funding for such schemes (Guy, 2000).

8.5.2 Factory Outlet Malls and Warehouse Clubs: The Fourth Wave Arrives

Despite a tightening of planning restrictions and a move by many retailers to adapt their strategic objectives to accord with new planning guidance, there were still several new forms of retailing to emerge during the 1990s. Following on from the arrival of self-service, supermarkets and regional shopping centres, two more American retail concepts arrived during the 1990s, in what came to be seen as a 'fourth wave' of retail decentralisation (Ferne, 1995). The first of these was the factory outlet mall, which was a unique retail proposition where goods were sold directly by manufacturers, who were willing to offer them at a significant discount in order to clear excess or seasonal stock. In developing in the United States, factory outlet malls had become associated with 'family outings' and 'retail tourism', and accordingly many developed adjacent to major highways and interstates, as well as resort areas (Jones and Vignali, 1993; Fernie and Fernie, 1997). The first factory outlet mall opened in the UK in 1992 and by 1997, there were 15 such developments across the country (Ferne and Fernie, 1997). In common with their American antecedents, most factory outlet malls developed away from town centres, as suppliers did not want the reduced prices to impact upon their full price items being stocked in town centres (Guy, 2002a). From a design standpoint, factory outlet malls tended to have an 'open street' layout with relatively small stores, and in contrast to shopping centres, tended not to have anchor tenants, instead relying on their overall offer to attract consumers. Factory outlet malls were initially accepted by planners, usually because of their emphasis on retail tourism, as well as the fact that many such developments were proposed as part of wider regeneration and investment schemes in brown field areas (Guy, 2007). However, following the publication of PPG6 in 1996, such proposals were expected to conform to the sequential approach, which acted as significant brake on development, as most developers and suppliers had no interest in town centre development. Accordingly, the development rate of factory outlet malls declined towards the end of the 1990s, although it has been suggested

that this may have had as much to do with the falling demand for space from suppliers, as it did with tightened planning policy (Guy, 2002a).

The second new form of retailing to arrive from the US during the 1990s was the warehouse club. Warehouse clubs sold a wide range of mainly non-food items in bulk quantities to 'club' members (Sampson and Tigert, 1994; Westlake and Smith, 1994). Despite their unique offer, warehouse clubs struggled to make much of an impact in Britain, with only two firms initially choosing to enter the market. The low uptake of the warehouse club format was subsequently attributed to the restrictive stance of planners following the introduction of the sequential approach in 1996. Despite operators arguing that they were technically wholesalers and therefore not subject to PPG6, both the government and local authorities decided to classify such developments as retail, meaning that large-scale proposals struggled to gain planning consent (Guy, 2007).

8.5.3 PPG6 and the Return of Town Centre Redevelopment

Following the introduction of the sequential test in 1996, there was a marked shift in both the types and locations of retail development in Britain. In simple terms, stricter controls on out-of-centre development, coupled with the requirement for retail impact studies to be prepared on proposals over a certain threshold, ultimately led to a drop in the number of planning applications and permissions for new out-of-centre development. However, the more restrictive planning climate had the opposite effect on proposals for town-centre retail development, which were now more likely to receive planning support. This marked a reversal of the prevailing trend during the 1980s, when the pace of such schemes had slowed down, as developers increasingly proposed large-scale out-of-town shopping centres.

One of the most significant shifts to occur with town-centre retail development during the 1990s was the increasing emphasis that was placed upon the regeneration benefits of such schemes. This was particularly the case in town centres whose existing retail provision was focussed on shopping centres that dated from the 1960s and 1970s, as many of these were now in a poor state of repair. Many proposals in the 1990s advocated a mix of uses, with retail taking centre stage, but being supported by other uses such as residential, commercial and leisure space. At the same time, there was a growing focus on the importance of issues such as design,

aesthetics and layout, and the need for new developments to be more consumer-friendly. While PPG6 did refocus much development on town centres, it remained that many large schemes continued to be influenced by growing levels of car ownership and usage. Whereas in previous years, car borne shoppers were targeted through easily accessible, out-of-centre developments, in the 1990s developers began to propose regional shopping centre scale developments, within the hearts of large towns and cities (Lowe, 2005). Such schemes were intended to attract car borne shoppers from across the local region and, accordingly, emphasised a consumer offer that included retail, restaurants and other leisure facilities.

8.6 The Legacy of Retail Planning in the 1990s

Following the publication of the 1996 version of PPG6, it became clear that the government were in favour of new retail development being located in town centres. With the introduction of the sequential approach, 'town-centre-first' became the maxim of retail planning and accordingly, the wider objectives of local retail planning strategy were expected to be geared towards sustaining and enhancing the vitality and viability of such centres. Over the course of several years, retail planning policy in England was slowly tightened, and by the time New Labour came to power in 1997, planning for retail development was arguably more restrictive than it had ever been before. New policy guidance emphasised the important role that local authorities would play in planning for new development in town centres and through the re-elevated development plan, the expectation was that local planners would provide a positive framework that would not only sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres, but accord with the broader objectives of sustainable development and environmental protection.

The expectation of the government was that through the new guidance, local planning authorities would plan positively and pro-actively for new retail development, working in partnership with the private sector to identify suitable locations, which met expected standards in terms of accessibility, design and sustainability. What happened in reality, however, was somewhat different, with the tendency being for planners to use the updated PPG6 guidance as a development control tool, through which they could guide new development into existing centres. While many planning decisions did align with the principles of town-centre-first, the

emphasis of local planning strategies was not on where development *should* take place, but rather on where it *should not* (Guy, 2007). In this sense, far from being positive and proactive, retail-planning strategies towards the end of the 1990s were highly regulatory and largely reactive. This restrictive stance inevitably brought planners into conflict with retailers and developers, many of whom contended that planners were inhibiting competition and therefore stifling consumer choice (Guy and Bennison, 2002, 2007). The stance of planners, by comparison, was that planning decisions should be made for the betterment of society as a whole and that for too long, retailers and developers had been given free rein over the locations and type of development that occurred.

One of the most noticeable changes in retail planning policy during the 1990s was the significant increase in its depth and complexity. The 1988 version of PPG6 was just 24 paragraphs long, however, by the time the 1996 version was published; guidance had expanded to 103 paragraphs. This greater complexity of guidance created problems for planners, particularly as various elements of the guidance were contradictory, overly vague or open to interpretation. Accordingly, it has been suggested that this may have been one of the main reasons that many planners chose not to develop positive, pro-active strategies, as had been intended (Guy, 2007). As the broad remit of retail planning within PPG6 accorded with the views of local planners, many determined that it was simpler and easier to use the PPG6 guidance as a framework for local retail planning strategy, rather than attempting to develop a locally tailored response. At the same time, it is also arguable that the increasing centralisation of decision making in regard of retail planning matters during the 1990s, impacted upon the willingness of local authorities to be positive and proactive in developing retail planning strategies. As planning was only a few years removed from the liberalised and deregulated era of the 1980s, when local planners had been largely bypassed by a government, it was entirely plausible to suggest that planners did not want to risk rocking the boat once more and, accordingly toed the government line on issues of retail development.

As a legacy of tighter planning guidelines in the 1990s, there was a reversal of the trend of growing out-of-centre retail development, such that by the end of the decade the amount of new floorspace added in town centres once more exceeded that of out-

of-centre locations (Pacione, 2009). Of course, this did not mean that out-of-centre development ceased, but rather, following the introduction of the sequential approach in 1996, much new development was redirected towards town centres, which now became the primary focus in this regard. Accordingly, there was an element of divergence between the styles of development that emerged, with out-of-centre retail tending to maintain its utilitarian aesthetic and functional design, and town centre retail focusing on integrated schemes, which emphasised design, regeneration and diversification (Guy, 2007). One issue that updated planning policy did not seem to curtail, however, was the continuing tendency for new retail development to be geared towards the car-borne consumer. Such development included a continuation of existing out-of-centre schemes, the arrival of new formats such as warehouse clubs and factory outlet malls and, perhaps most notably, the rise of mega, retail-led regeneration schemes in larger towns and cities. In this regard, despite an emphasis on protecting the environment through the encouragement of sustainable transport and reduced car usage, it appeared as though the overt focus on town-centre-first, effectively acted to override other concerns in planning. In this same vein, it was also noticeable that while the sequential approach was meant to apply to all main town centre uses, the tendency was for it to be primarily applied to retail development. As such, while many town centres have benefitted from an increase in non-retail uses, many others have failed to achieve the broader objective of diversifying their offer. In effect, it is arguable that by adopting PPG6 as a regulatory control tool, rather than as a framework for positive planning, and by applying its key policy tools only in relation to retail development, planning failed to achieve many of its other objectives at this time, including the promotion of sustainable development, the protection of the environment, the promotion of competition and innovation in retail, and the diversification of town centres.

8.7 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the evolution of retail and retail planning policy in Britain during the 1990s, a period during which sustainable development, environmental protection and the need to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres, became key considerations in planning. It has been shown that through a series of reforms to planning guidance, tight regulatory

control was once more returned to retail planning, which had the effect of curtailing much of the rampant out-of-centre development that had characterised the 1980s. Notably, however, there was no return to the proactive programmes of planning, which had occurred prior to the 1980s, with the focus instead shifting towards a more reactive and regulatory focussed approach to new retail development. It has also been shown that with the introduction of the sequential approach, town-centre-first became an established part of retail planning policy, which emboldened planners to define themselves once more, as arbiters of how and where retail development should occur. As a result, this created significant tension with commercial interests who felt that planners were not being consistent or fair in how they assessed retail-planning proposals. Whatever the case, in the more cautious planning environment of the 1990s, the traditional conceptual and ideological principles of retail planning were able to thrive once more, arguably being elevated to a position of strength that they had never had before.

9 RETAIL PLANNING IN THE 2000s: PROMOTING SOCIALLY INCLUSIVE RETAIL DEVELOPMENT

9.1 Introduction

By the 2000s, it was clear that town-centre-first was now the dominant strategic position in retail planning and, as a result, a new emphasis on regenerating Britain's town and city centres was able to thrive. By the end of the decade, however, increasing economic uncertainty and the rise of new digital technology, threatened these spaces once more. The following chapter explores the evolution of retail and retail planning policy during this period, focussing specifically on the emergence of a new 'socially-inclusive' planning discourse, as well as the growing threat that was posed, as online retailing began to make waves in British society. The chapter begins by examining the emergence of a new 'third-way' of governance that was established following the election on New Labour in 1997 (section 9.2), before considering how this led to a reform of urban policy and planning, during the early part of the 2000s (section 9.3). The chapter then moves on to explore the continuing issues that plagued retail planning at this time and how the subsequent reform of planning guidance (section 9.4) fostered a new emphasis on the issues of urban regeneration and social inclusivity (section 9.5). The chapter concludes by considering how the latter part of the decade was characterised by both increasing economic uncertainty

and the rise of online shopping (section 9.6), both of which threatened town centres once more.

9.2 New Labour and the Third Way

Labour's victory in the 1997 general election ended 18 years of Conservative government in Britain. Led by new Prime Minister Tony Blair, Labour swept into power on the back of a pledge to reform politics and modernise public services, all the while maintaining tight fiscal control of the economy. To achieve this, the party defined a new political vision for Britain, which balanced the ideals of both the left and right in a 'third way' of governance, where the benefits of the free market could continue to be embraced, while the interests of the most vulnerable in society would be protected (Giddens, 1998, 2000). At the heart of this new political philosophy was a rejection of the traditional view that social democracy was somehow incompatible with free market capitalism (Dunleavy et al. 2006; Finlayson, 2009).

Among their many election pledges, New Labour promised that they would continue the tight fiscal and monetary control of the economy, all the while investing in and modernising the provision of public services in Britain. Central to New Labour's vision of Britain in the 21st century was the idea that the country needed to 'modernise', in terms of both its social structures and its economic and social base. After several decades of painful transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial society, Britain was now emerging in an increasingly globalised world, where nation-states competed with one another for investment from huge, internationally operated businesses. As Britain was no longer able to compete in terms of costs, it had to offer something different, namely knowledge and skills. For New Labour, therefore, the belief was that prosperity would be achieved through 'the people', and that, as such, it was the role of the state to help citizens reach their maximum potential.

When Labour came to power, there was no attempt to reverse the changes that had been brought about through privatisation and trade union reform. While the new government accepted many of the reforms that had been carried out by their predecessors, they were also keen to implement changes of their own. The party introduced a national minimum wage in 1999, while key acts of parliament were passed into law including the Human Rights Act, 1998 and the Freedom of

Information Act, 2000. Local government reform was also high on the agenda for New Labour and with the passing of the Local Government Act, 2000, they established a new 'executive model' of governance in local authorities, which was intended to facilitate the devolution of powers to local areas, so that they could better address issues and problems that were relevant to them.

During much of New Labour's time in power, the British economy was characterised by strong economic performance and, on the back of this, the government pushed forward with its plan to modernise public services, with significant investment being put into constructing new hospitals and schools, and funding for education and healthcare being substantially increased (DETR, 2000a). Notably, under New Labour, the emphasis on public-private partnership went further than just investment and development programmes, and included the delivery of services as well. For the government, who were committed to upholding both free market principles and social democratic values, there was a belief that if the public sector could not effectively supply something, then the private sector should be allowed to do so. In this sense, the role of government was to guarantee the delivery of services, even if it did not deliver the services itself (Imrie and Raco, 2003).

One of the key components of New Labour's future vision of Britain was the need to address what they saw as the increasingly problematic issue of social disadvantage and inequality in society. Accordingly, many of the policy approaches of New Labour sought to replace the traditional aim of 'equality of outcome' with 'equality of opportunity', believing that if those factors that acted as barriers to opportunity could be removed, this would allow all individuals to achieve economic prosperity and thus reduce inequality and social injustice. Central to this objective, was tackling the issue of social exclusion, which was seen to reflect a series of interconnected issues, including unemployment, lack of education, low income, substandard housing, poor health and family breakdown.

9.3 Urban Policy and Planning Reform under New Labour

New Labour's 'third way' of governance established a framework in which the government's desire to tackle poverty and deprivation could be blended with their broad support for neo-liberal principles and the belief that market forces should drive

the redevelopment of Britain's towns and cities. Accordingly, Labour emphasised the need for urban policy and planning to change, such that they became more cognisant of the interrelationship between the various economic and social dimensions of urban issues.

9.3.1 Delivering an Urban Renaissance in Britain's Towns and Cities

In 1998, the government established the Urban Task Force to look into the decline of England's towns and cities, and subsequently provide a framework that could support the government in their objective of delivering an 'urban renaissance'. In their final report, the Task Force noted that Britain's towns and cities had suffered from "a combination of deteriorating physical form, social polarisation, environmental degradation, loss of skills and investment, and widespread crime" (UTF, 1999, p21). Accordingly, the report went on to make a series of recommendations regarding what the key priorities of government policy should be. These included a commitment to excellence in urban design, the creation of integrated urban transport systems, improved management of the urban environment, the targeting of resources to areas of decline, a focus on redeveloping brown field sites, and the need to leverage public expenditure in order to attract further private capital investment (UTF, 1999). The report also placed a considerable emphasis on the importance of promoting sustainable development, arguing that more needed to be done to attract people back into towns and cities.

The following year, the government published a new urban white paper, which set out their strategy for delivering an urban renaissance in England's towns and cities. The white paper established a framework for how the government intended to drive forward the regeneration of urban areas, based largely upon the recommendations made by the Urban Task Force. There was a clear emphasis on enabling towns and cities to reach their potential, which would be achieved by bringing "together economic, social and environmental measures in a coherent approach", which would enable these places "to achieve their economic potential" (DETR, 2000a, para 6). The report also stressed that the multitude of issues facing towns and cities should not be looked at in isolation and that, as such, there should be a concerted effort to create more diverse and sustainable communities.

With a new framework for urban development now established, the government turned their attention to reforming urban policy, so that it provided the necessary tools through which they could deliver on their pledges. New Labour sought to coordinate urban policy approaches across all levels of governance, from area-based local initiatives, through regional and sub-regional strategies and ultimately to national and even EU policy (Atkinson, 2007; Goodwin, 2004; Pacione, 2009). Broadly speaking urban policy under New Labour consisted of two strands, each of which corresponded to the specific focus of the policies themselves. Neighbourhood renewal policies encompassed those local, area-based initiatives that operated within the framework of tackling social exclusion and deprivation, while urban regeneration policies encompassed those initiatives that aimed to promote economic and social development at the city-region level, and which operated within the framework of creating sustainable communities.

Unlike previous Labour governments, New Labour believed that welfare-based policies could be implemented within the parameters of a market-orientated philosophy, which promoted social-inclusivity as an outcome of economic prosperity. As such, New Labour sought to develop a long-term strategy for community and neighbourhood renewal, where locally targeted initiatives were tied to broader scale strategies for urban and economic development. During the early part of their term in office, New Labour launched a raft of area-based urban policy initiatives, including the New Deal for Communities, which was seen by many as the ideal solution to tackling exclusion and deprivation in the poorest areas of the country (Foley and Martin, 2000; Lawless, 2004, 2006; Pacione, 2009). Broadly speaking, New Labour maintained the same stance as previous governments when it came to the causes of deprivation, namely that deprived areas had been bypassed by the broader success of the national economy (Johnstone and Whitehead, 2004). In contrast to the approaches of previous governments, however, New Labour emphasised the need to address social exclusion, civic regeneration and local community involvement, as part of a coordinated programme of neighbourhood renewal (Purdue et al, 2000; Imrie and Raco, 2003). Accordingly, throughout the various policy approaches that were introduced, there was a core focus on making sure that the public services provided by local authorities were more effective at responding to local challenges and issues (Bramley, Evans and Noble, 2005).

In addition to locally focussed urban-policy approaches, New Labour also established a series of broader initiatives, which were intended to promote urban regeneration, as part of a wider drive to create sustainable communities. The government set out their strategy for sustainable communities in 2003 (ODPM, 2003), identifying a series of key priorities, including the need to develop more land for residential and commercial use, the need to use public resources to stimulate economic growth, and the need to create more jobs. As part of this drive, the government worked in partnership with a variety of different local, regional and national bodies, including English Partnerships and the Regional Development Agencies. In order to meet their pledge to deliver sustainable urban regeneration, the government introduced a variety of local delivery mechanisms, including Urban Regeneration Companies, Urban Development Corporations, and Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders.

9.3.2 Regionalism, Reform and an Integrated Approach to Planning

When New Labour came to power in 1997, one of their core beliefs was that there was a need to reform and modernise the institutional and structural forms of governance in Britain. This belief extended as far as planning system, which the government felt was overly bureaucratic, prone to extensive delays and fundamentally lacking in coordination (DETR, 1998). Accordingly, in 2001, the government released a planning green paper, which set how they expected the planning system to operate in the new millennium. In identifying weaknesses in the current system, the green paper noted that planning was too complex, too slow, and failed to engage effectively with local community interests (DTLR, 2001). At the same time, it stated that “the planning process is too often perceived to be a set of rules aimed at preventing development rather than making sure good development goes ahead” (DTLR, 2001, para 2.1) and that, as such, the current planning system was falling short of what was expected by the government, businesses and the wider population. While there were voices who fundamentally opposed making changes to planning, the stance of many within the profession was that some form of change was necessary, with many unhappy at the increasingly entrenched regulatory position that had emerged since the early 1990s (LGA, 2003; RTPI, 2001, 2003).

In order to facilitate the proposed reforms of planning, the government in 2004 passed the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, which served to amend substantially the operation of planning at national, regional and local levels (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2009). Existing Planning Policy Guidance notes were slowly revised or replaced with new Planning Policy Statements and a new level of sub-regional planning was introduced. At the same time, the existing framework of Structure Plans, Local Plans and Unitary Development Plans was replaced with a new Local Development Framework. While the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act served to reform the statutory framework for development planning in England, it was only part of the government's wider modernisation agenda, which was fundamentally geared towards the establishment of a new 'spatial planning' system, in which the role of planning was widened to incorporate the delivery of integrated public services. Accordingly, the government sought to integrate the operation of planning with other strands of economic and social policy, as part of a drive to create a mechanism capable of delivering long-term sustainable development.

Broadly speaking, the response of professionals to the new spatial planning system was positive, in part because it was seen to re-establish a strategic role for planners, and in part, because it was seen to elevate once more environmental and social considerations within the operation of planning. Other commentators, however, were more wary, suggesting that in spite of the rhetoric, the inherent contradiction between New Labour's support for social-democratisation and economic liberalism was likely to mean that both sustainable development and social inclusivity would ultimately be subsumed beneath the seemingly more powerful imperative to drive economic growth and foster economic competitiveness (Cowell and Owens, 2006). At the same time, While New Labour clearly had a vision for how they expected a modernised planning system to operate, the reforms they introduced, did little to quell the disquiet among critics regarding the conduciveness of planning to business interests, particularly in relation to the speed and consistency of decision-making.

Given this, it was perhaps unsurprising when, in 2005, the Treasury department commissioned a review to look into the impact that the planning system had on economic growth and prosperity. The report, which was published the following

year, made several recommendations regarding how the planning system could better support economic growth, noting that in simple terms, it needed to become simpler, quicker and more responsive to economic interests (Barker, 2006). A year later, the government released a new planning white paper, entitled *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, which incorporated many of the recommendations made in the Barker Review. In identifying the key challenges facing the country today, the paper noted that the planning system had to be able to deliver development that was not only cognisant of climate change and environmental protection, but that would also deliver sustainable economic development, increased housing provision, and improvements to local and national infrastructure. However, while the paper noted that recent reforms had helped to make planning more efficient and conducive to these needs, it also noted that it continued to be too complex, confusing and unpredictable.

9.3.3 The Legacy of New Labour Planning Reform

Under Tony Blair, New Labour sought to strike a balance between the ideological positions of the left and the right, championing both the benefits of the free-market, as well as the need for a social revolution to tackle entrenched issues such as child poverty and social deprivation. In the context of planning, reforms implemented by New Labour sought to reconfigure planning, as a means of ‘strategic place shaping’, which could deliver community focussed sustainable development, through a process of multi-scalar government partnership and collaboration with the private, community and voluntary spheres (Tewdwr-Jones, 2004). In this sense, the reform of planning focused more on the networks, processes and relationships of operation, rather than its statutory instruments, with the objective being to turn planning into a “proactive coordinating activity, intended to assist in delivering development as part of continued economic growth” (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2009, p75). In accordance with their pre-election pledge to increase levels of localised decision-making, by devolving more powers to the regions, the government’s reform of planning served as a means to come good on this ‘localism’ agenda (Morphet, 2006). Such reforms certainly accorded with the wider stance of New Labour, who emphasised the importance of promoting forms of networked governance and participatory democracy (Allmendinger, 2006).

Central to the reform of planning under New Labour was the establishment of a new spatial planning system, which sought to move planning away from the largely regulatory, land-use control approach of previous decades. However, in contrast to reforms of the past, New Labour sought to depoliticise this process, conceptualising change as an act of modernisation, which was necessary in order to make the system ‘fit-for-purpose’ in the 21st century. Thus, far from facilitating a radical overhaul of the planning system, New Labour instead sought to establish a kind of ‘neo-traditional’ planning system, in which the traditional functions and objectives of planning remained, albeit adjusted to account for the realities of modern society (Peel and Lloyd, 2007). For New Labour, therefore, changes in the way the planning system operated were just as important as the outcomes themselves and, as such, their reform of planning sought to not only redefine its operation, but also the *raison d’être* of planners themselves (Finlayson, 2009).

9.4 Planning for Retail under New Labour

Under New Labour, the broad thrust of retail planning remained as it had before, with a strong emphasis on tight development control, in order to guide new retail development towards town centres. However, not long after taking office, it became apparent that the recently published PPG6 guidance was not clear enough in how certain aspects of policy were to be enforced, which meant that once again, retail planning policy was deemed confusing, contradictory and likely to lead to inconsistent decision making.

9.4.1 Confusion Reins Once More: Evaluating the Effectiveness of PPG6

Foremost among these issues was the question of how the sequential approach should be applied when dealing with proposals for new out-of-centre development. Following the publication of PPG6, two competing interpretations of the sequential approach had emerged (Guy, 2007). The ‘format’ interpretation held that planners should look to assess applications based upon the proposed format of the development, and that if no suitable site could be found in town centres, then it should be allowed on a sequentially less preferential location. The ‘class of goods’ interpretation held that planners should look to apply the sequential approach based upon the class of goods being sold and, as such, unless the goods being sold were

inappropriate for town centres, the development should be adapted to fit into a town centre site, including being disaggregated if necessary. While this was arguably the most problematic issue at this time, it was by no means the only one. A 1997 government report had identified additional issues in relation to the question of what constituted a 'suitable' or 'available' site, and the question of whether developers were required to demonstrate need in all proposals for new retail development (House of Commons, 1997). A High Court ruling in 1998 had decreed that retailers and developers were not required to show need when proposing new developments, nor were they bound to show how any proposed out-of-centre development would positively impact town centres, only how they would not damage them (Blackhall, 2000; Local Government Chronicle, 1998). Perhaps unsurprisingly, developers and planning authorities could not agree over this, or any of the other issues, and thus turned to the government seeking clarification.

The identified issues with PPG6 guidance were further clouded following the election of New Labour, as questions emerged regarding whether the new focus on tackling social exclusion and promoting urban regeneration, elevated the relative importance of these considerations when making planning decisions. Following the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit in 1999, it had been suggested that local retail planning strategies needed to account for the issue of accessibility in areas of high deprivation (SEU, 1998; DoH, 1999). However, there was little in PPG6 guidance that specifically dealt with this issue, beyond it being suggested that there was a need to make sure that retail developments were accessible by less mobile groups, including the elderly, disabled and those without access to a car. On the issue of regeneration, PPG6 guidance appeared to suggest that this was not an appropriate material consideration, noting that retail "should not be used simply as a mechanism to bring vacant or derelict sites back into development" (DoE, 1996, para 3.25). Fundamentally, both of these issues were tied to the question of need and whether or not schemes designed to regenerate areas or promote social inclusion could be classified as showing evidence of need based upon government policy.

In response to these problems, the National Retail Planning Forum commissioned a report to look into how the sequential approach was being used in practice. Their report noted that there were many issues related to the interpretation and

implementation of policy, and that the question of ‘suitability’ and ‘availability’, the correct way to implement the sequential approach, and the issue of demonstrating ‘need’, were all inherently tied together, as a “triangle of inter-related decisions” (CBHP, 2000, p73). In this sense, the report suggested that the sequential approach could be interpreted in different ways depending upon how ‘need’ was defined and whether or not ‘suitable’ sites were seen to exist in the town centre. In response to the National Retail Planning Forum Report, the government issued a clarification in which they suggested that local authorities should look to apply a ‘class of goods’ interpretation of the sequential approach, emphasising that just because a proposal was of a scale and format that would be hard to accommodate in a town centre, this was not an appropriate justification for allowing out-of-centre development (DETR, 2000b). A further ministerial statement was released in 2003 that sought to clarify further still the operation of PPG6 (McNulty, 2003). The statement noted that all non-town centre based proposals for new retail development were required to demonstrate need, abide by the principles of a class-of-goods interpretation of the sequential approach, consider their likely impact on nearby centres, and show that they were accessible by a choice of means of transport. It also clarified that while regeneration and employment creation were acceptable material considerations in planning decisions, neither should be considered as providing evidence of need.

The various attempts by the government to clarify retail planning guidance did little to quell the disquiet among critics. Recognising this and acknowledging the evident confusion that continued to exist, the government in 2001 commissioned their own report to look into the effectiveness of PPG6. The report, entitled *Policy Evaluation of the Effectiveness of PPG6*, was released in 2004 and noted that while the guidance was broadly understood, there were “inconsistencies in the interpretation of PPG6 and its clarifications” which were seen to have “frustrated developers’ attempts to plan with certainty” (ODPM, 2004, para 4). As a result, planning decisions were being made “in the absence of clear policy guidance” (ODPM, 2004, para 7), which resulted in “ad hoc interpretations based on often inconsistent appeal decisions” (ODPM, 2004, para 17). It went on to note that in spite of the various attempts to clarify guidance, there remained “evidence of a perceived inconsistency in decision-making, largely due to a lack of clarity in the guidance” and that accordingly “clarification is needed, either in a policy document or in good practice guidance, on

how to apply the sequential approach and the class of goods approach” (ODPM, 2004, para 52).

9.4.2 PPS6 and a Socially Inclusive Planning Approach

The fundamental objective of the ODPM report was to establish the overall operational effectiveness of existing policy guidance, including identifying any issues within the existing system. However, before the report was even published, it became clear that the government intended to update and reissue retail planning policy guidance in line with the wider reform of planning that was being conducted at this time. This was primarily driven by the government’s desire to incorporate wider policy objectives into the retail-planning framework, including the need to tackle social exclusion and promote sustainable development. It was also necessary to amend retail planning guidance following the introduction of Regional Spatial Strategies, which were now to serve as a ‘guide’ in the formulation of Local Development Frameworks, and which were required to establish a region-wide hierarchy of retail centres, as well as outlining the strategic development of those centres that were of regional importance. Accordingly, a new guidance note for retail planning was issued in 2005, entitled *Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning for Town Centres*. The guidance was notable for establishing a clear link between the need to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres, and the wider government objectives of social inclusion, urban regeneration, economic growth, sustainable development and high quality urban design. In this sense, the guidance emphasised that “development should be focused in existing centres in order to strengthen and, where appropriate, regenerate them” (ODPM, 2005, para 2.1) and that “where growth cannot be accommodated in identified existing centres, local planning authorities should plan for the extension of the primary shopping area if there is a need for additional retail provision” (ODPM, 2005, para 2.5). Accordingly, local authorities were instructed to plan positively for new retail development by establishing a hierarchy of centres in which new development should be focussed, noting that although “networks and hierarchies are dynamic, and will change over time”, such change “should come through the development plan process, rather than through planning applications” (ODPM, 2005, para 2.10). Notably, however, the guidance cautioned against focussing investment solely in the strongest centres,

suggesting that it was necessary to promote an equitable pattern of growth, particularly at the regional level.

One of the main aims of the new guidance was to address some of the underlying issues that had been identified within previous guidance. On the issue of the sequential approach, the guidance took a somewhat less restrictive stance than that which had been emphasised through various policy amendments and ministerial statements over previous years. While the guidance reiterated that the sequential approach should be applied to all proposals for retail development outside of existing centres, it emphasised the need for ‘flexibility’ and ‘realism’, with local authorities being advised to be “sensitive to the needs of the community and stakeholders, including developers and operators” (ODPM, 2005, para 2.45). Similarly, it suggested that retailers and developers should show flexibility in terms of the scale, format, and design of proposed developments. Notably, there appeared to be a partial reversal of the previous stance that planners should look to apply a ‘class-of-goods’ interpretation of the sequential approach, with the guidance pointing out that while proposals “which comprise a group of retail and/or leisure units... should consider the degree to which the constituent units within the proposal could be accommodated on more centrally-located sites” (ODPM, 2005, para 3.17), “a single retailer or leisure operator should not be expected to split their proposed development into separate sites” (ODPM, 2005, para 3.18).

The new guidance also sought to address the issue of need, which had been a particular point of contention in relation to PPG6. While the guidance emphasised that need was an essential criterion in both the formulation of development plans and the assessment of planning proposals, it noted, “additional benefits in respects of regeneration and employment do not constitute indicators of need” (ODPM, 2005, para 2.37). While this provided clarification on what had been a major point of contention, the guidance failed to explicitly identify what did constitute need, instead suggesting “local planning authorities should place greater weight on quantitative need for additional floorspace” (ODPM, 2005, para 2.33), which was to be done through forecasting of future trends in population, expenditure and productivity. While qualitative need was identified as a consideration, there was little explanation of what planners should be looking to assess in this regard, other than make sure that

there was ‘genuine choice’ that met the needs of local communities. Another notable amendment to guidance on need in PPS6 was the effective establishment of a two-tier system wherein it was “not necessary to demonstrate the need for retail proposals within the primary shopping areas” (ODPM, 2005, para 3.8), but “need must be demonstrated for any application for a main town centre use which would be in an edge-of-centre, or out-of-centre location” (ODPM, 2005, para 3.9).

A year following the publication of PPS6, the government issued updated planning guidance in relation to transport in *Planning Policy Guidance 13: Transport*. The central emphasis of the guidance was largely unchanged from previous versions, with planners being encouraged to promote new development that minimised car usage and promoted sustainable forms of transport. The guidance was notable, however, for raising the issue of the internet and likely potential impact that it would have on existing retail environments and town centres, something that had not been addressed in PPS6. While the guidance cautioned that it was “too early to tell what effect increasing use of the internet for shopping and just in time delivery will have on the size and location of retail businesses”, it suggested that “local authorities should seize the opportunity to use new technology to promote urban renaissance and to reinforce the existing role of town, district and local centres” (DCLG, 2006, para 36).

By the mid-2000s, it appeared as though the government had now established the required planning framework to enable local authorities to effectively support and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres, as well as the wider retail hierarchy. However, as the country’s economy began to slip into recession from late 2007, the decline of Britain’s high streets and town centres became a major national issue once more. Accordingly, in the late-2000s, the government released a series of additional guidance documents, which were intended to help support local authorities during this challenging time. The first of these was a document entitled *Looking After Our Town Centres*, which was intended to provide guidance for how local authorities could look after their town centre during the current economic downturn (DCLG, 2009a). In emphasising the severity of the challenges they were facing, the guidance noted that it was likely that things would get worse before they got better and that in order to respond effectively, there was a need to make sure that town

centres were being managed in partnership with local people, local businesses and local service providers.

The second document published at this time was entitled *Planning for Town Centres: Practice Guidance on Need, Impact and the Sequential Approach* (DCLG, 2009b). This purpose of this guidance was to provide practical support on the interpretation of policy tools within PPS6, in particular the sequential approach, the needs test and impact assessment. The document noted that although local authorities had been encouraged to plan positively for retail and town centres, the tendency remained for policy tools within planning guidance to be used largely as development control measures. While the government accepted that controlling ‘negative’ development was important, it was just as vital to promote “new development of the right scale in the right place and at the right time as part of an overall strategy and vision for their town centre” (DCLG, 2009b, para 1.5). In line with this, the guidance was intended to help local authorities develop positive strategies for development, by aiding them in using the needs test, impact assessment and the sequential approach as part of this process.

9.5 Regeneration and Recentralisation: Retail Development in the 2000s

The reform of retail planning guidance that came with the publication of PPS6 occurred partly in response to the evident confusion of both retailers and planners to existing guidance. Following the introduction of PPG6 in 1996, it had become increasingly hard for retailers and developers to justify the development of new out-of-centre retail spaces, which created a significant conflict with planners, who they felt were enforcing planning policy inconsistently and unfairly. Nevertheless, in the tighter planning climate, many retail firms accepted that it was now necessary to have a sounder rationale for planning applications and accordingly, many soon began to alter their strategic approaches in order to better promote the positive benefits of proposed schemes, focussing particularly on two issues of importance to the government: urban regeneration and social inclusion.

9.5.1 The Rise of Retail-Led Regeneration

From the late 1990s, there was a marked upturn in the number of retail developments permitted by planners under the guise of urban regeneration. While this trend

accelerated under New Labour, who emphasised the need to regenerate declining urban areas, it was not actually new and, in fact, since as far back as the end of the Second World War, retail had been used as a platform to help redevelop and revitalise towns and cities (Evans, 1997). The underlying need for regeneration in many towns and cities was attributed to the fact that, since the 1970s, many town centre functions had increasingly suffered from the process of decentralisation, which had resulted in central areas losing jobs, residents, and retail and leisure attractions. Historically, the strength of town centres lay in the agglomeration and transportation advantages that they could offer both consumers and producers due to their optimised location (Rowley, 1993). However, as town centre functions increasingly began to decentralise, this competitive advantage waned and so too did the attractiveness of these centres. As a result, by the 1980s, many inner city areas in Britain were associated with urban decay, crime and social deprivation (Lawless, 1989), which acted to further push consumers towards out-of-centre retail and leisure venues. In fact, such was the severity of problems facing town centres at this time, that some began to question whether the traditional intra-urban hierarchy that had predominated throughout history, remained the most appropriate form of urban structure (Dawson, 1988b). By the 1990s, the need to regenerate town centres became a pressing issue within planning and, accordingly, various measures were introduced to better support them, including improved management of town centres, targeted town centre revitalisation programmes and place marketing (Evans, 1997; Page and Hardyman, 1996; Warnaby, Alexander and Medway, 1998; Whysall, 1995). Following the election of New Labour there was also a renewed emphasis on issues of design, layout, accessibility, safety, cleanliness and aesthetic attractiveness and, as a result, by the early 2000s, many town centres appeared to be reasserting their positions as primary retail destinations once more (Tallon, 2010).

While the renewed focus on town centres did have a lot to do with proactive strategies aimed at revitalising and regenerating these locations, it was equally true to suggest that the more restrictive planning climate acted to ‘force’ a lot of new development into existing centres. Accordingly, from the late 1990s there was a significant growth in the number of ‘mega’ retail-led urban regeneration projects that were focussed upon major town and city centres (Lowe, 2005; Tallon, 2008). Notable schemes included the Bullring in Birmingham (Emery, 2006), Cabot Circus

in Bristol (Tallon, 2008) and Liverpool ONE in Liverpool (Parker and Garnell, 2006), while other similar schemes took place in Southampton, Reading, Glasgow, Dundee, Bath, Exeter, Cardiff and Solihull (Lowe, 2005; Tallon, 2008). What marked these schemes as different from regeneration programmes in previous years was their scale. For example, the Liverpool ONE development covered a 42-acre site and saw over 1,000,000 sq/ft of new retail space added in a project that cost over £1bn (Littlefield, 2009). The driving forces behind such projects were wide ranging and included increasing demand from growing town centre populations (Bromley, Tallon and Roberts, 2007) and the recognition of a significant supply gap in major cities, following the loss of trade to out-of-centre retail during the 1980s and 1990s (Littlefield, 2009). In addition to their significant retail provision, most schemes also provided substantial amounts of leisure, residential and office space (Dixon, 2005; Guy, 2008), while in keeping with the need for more attentive and integrated development, many schemes were developed around existing street patterns, rather than being fully enclosed shopping malls (Guy, 2007).

9.5.2 Retail Regeneration and the Promotion of Social Inclusion

While town centres tended to gain much of the attention for retail-led regeneration schemes at this time, there was plenty of development in this vein that occurred outside of town centres, particularly in deprived areas or in areas of industrial decline (Thomas, Bromley and Tallon, 2004, 2006; Wrigley, Guy and Lowe, 2002). While planning authorities were adopting an increasingly restrictive stance on out-of-centre development, the new emphasis on urban regeneration and social inclusion provided an avenue for retailers and developers to garner support for their schemes, both within and outside of town centres (Guy, 2002b, 2008; Lowe, 2005; Wrigley, Guy and Lowe, 2002). At the same time, broader arguments of employment creation, training and skills provision and local economic development, also served as a means to promote retail, as a viable regenerative power not just physically, but socially as well (Dixon, 2005; McQuaid, Lindsay and Greig, 2005; Potts, 2007).

Accordingly, during the 2000s, an increasing amount of out-of-centre retail development was allowed under the guise of urban regeneration, particularly schemes that were anchored by large supermarkets (Tallon, 2010). This was especially common in deprived areas, where local authorities were eager to address

the emergence of so called 'food deserts' (Wrigley, 2002). Food deserts were defined as those locations where cheap and nutritious food was hard to come by, which particularly affected the carless and less mobile shopper, who did not have the means to travel further afield to purchase groceries (Clarke, Eyre and Guy, 2002; Wrigley et al., 2004; Wrigley, Warm and Margetts, 2003). As food deserts were in most instances located in highly deprived areas, local authorities were willing to allow new retail development, due to the perceived benefits in terms of regeneration, job creation, economic investment and social inclusion.

By the end of the decade, the use of retail as a means to drive regeneration was now well established and, in many regards, was viewed as a positive and necessary step to help in fighting back against the decline of town centres and the wider retail hierarchy. However, such schemes were not without their critics who identified issues in relation to the exclusion of certain groups (MacLeod and Ward, 2002), the process of gentrification (Smith, 2002), and the privatisation of public space (Steel and Symes, 2005). Other critics pointed to the fact that many regeneration schemes served to reinforce the 'homogenised' nature of the high street, as they were dominated by the same, major chain multiples. Accordingly, critics were soon expressing concern at the problem of 'clone town' Britain and the likely impact that this would have (NEF, 2005).

9.5.3 Managing, Maintaining and Marketing Town Centres

From the turn of the millennium, there was also an increasing emphasis placed upon the management, maintenance and marketing of town centres, as a means to help fight back against town centre decline. In simple terms, town centre management involved the implementation of carefully planned and coordinated policies, which were designed to both sustain and enhance retail environments (Jones, 1990). While town centre management was not new, by the early 2000s effective town centre management was increasingly recognised as being crucial to supporting the vitality and viability of town centres (Reeve, 2004). While many schemes initially focused upon economic and physical issues, over time greater consideration was given to the social, cultural and environmental needs of town centres, and the various measures that could be used to support them (Hollins, Oc and Tiesdall, 1997; Oc and Tiesdall, 1998).

While town centre management proved to be particularly popular, one of its main limitations was the fact that it was a voluntary and largely informal arrangement. Accordingly, in the 2000s, a new, more formalised mechanism of local strategic management began to grow in popularity: the Business Improvement District (BIDs). BIDs first emerged in Canada during the 1970s and were a form of public-private partnership in which local business owners voted to make a collective contribution to the maintenance, marketing and management of their local area (Ward, 2011). In simple terms, BIDs were designed to provide a mechanism through which the private sector could take on the role of providing certain local services, such as street cleaning, security and the management of street furniture, in addition to providing a funding stream that could support the marketing and promotion of the local area. In this sense, the primary purpose of BIDs was to boost the local economy, by making areas more attractive to visit, and for this reason, most BIDs tended to be focused on retail and commercial areas (Peel and Lloyd, 2008). In many ways, the growing popularity of BIDs reflected the growing dissatisfaction that many local businesses had with the public sector's management of town centres and, as such, they emerged as an alternative to the more traditional practices of municipal planning and development (Mitchell, 2000).

9.6 The Return of Town Centre Decline

By the mid-2000s, it appeared as though strategies targeted towards alleviating town centre decline were beginning to make some headway, particularly in larger towns and cities. Retail-led urban regeneration programmes were now underway in many town centres and, as the country continued to be buoyed by strong economic performance, so levels of consumer expenditure rose, reaching a level of £259bn in Q4 2007 (ONS, 2014). Things soon took a turn for the worse, however, and when the economy was plunged into recession following the global financial crisis of 2007/08, it precipitated the emergence of a new, digital challenge, that once more threatened the vitality and viability of Britain's town centres.

9.6.1 Britain under Brown and Cameron: From Boom to Bust

In 2007, Tony Blair stepped down as Prime Minister, handing over power to former Chancellor Gordon Brown. Just a few months after taking office, however, the new

Prime Minister was already facing a challenge unlike anything his predecessor had encountered, as the country started feeling the effects of the ongoing subprime mortgage crisis in the United States. When, in September 2007, the British bank Northern Rock requested financial assistance from the government, it heralded the start of what would become one of the most severe economic downturns ever to hit the country (IMF, 2009). The United Kingdom was badly affected by the crisis because the country's economy was particularly exposed to financial services and, as a result, the government was forced to put together a £500 billion rescue package to bail out failing banks. While this briefly stabilised the markets, it was not enough to prevent the country from entering into a prolonged recession, with the country experiencing six consecutive quarters of negative economic growth between mid 2008 and late 2009 (ONS, 2016).

Gordon Brown's handling of the financial crisis was praised by many and was particularly notable because it saw the government return, albeit briefly, to the principles of Keynesian economics (Leach, Coxall and Robins, 2011). Nonetheless, public support for Labour soon fell, with a growing belief that their liberal economic policies were responsible for the economy's exposure to the financial crisis (Leach, Coxall and Robins, 2011). By the time of the 2010 general election, it was clear that Britain was now in a vastly different position than it had been just a few short years earlier. It came as no surprise, therefore, when Labour's sizeable majority was overhauled in the election, with the Conservative Party, led by David Cameron, entering into a political alliance with Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats.

One of the first acts of the new government was to address the country's ballooning budget deficit, which by 2010 was running at over £100billion per annum (ONS, 2015f). As part of an emergency budget announced in June 2010, the government announced their commitment to reducing the deficit (HM Treasury, 2010a) and accordingly, in October 2010, outlined their plans to make £81billion of savings by 2015 (HM Treasury, 2010b). The budget cuts implemented by the government proved to be highly contentious and while many accepted the need to rein in spending; others felt that the impacts were being felt most acutely by the most vulnerable in society. Protests against a rise in tuition fees took place in numerous cities in 2010, while anti-austerity marches occurred throughout 2011. While much

public anger was directed towards the reforms and austerity measures introduced by the government, there was also growing anger at rising economic inequality and the corporate greed and political corruption that were perceived to be responsible. Social tensions came to a head in August 2011, when several instances of severe social disobedience and rioting took place in towns and cities across England.

9.6.2 The Digital Revolution Arrives: From Retailing to E-tailing

The severe economic turmoil in Britain towards end of the 2000s had a profound impact upon the retail sector; with many retailers embarking upon extensive re-organisation programmes aimed at both reducing their costs and improving their operational efficiency. However, the challenge facing high street retailers and town centres was not limited to the impacts of the economic downturn. Since the late 1990s, electronic retailing had been slowly changing the behaviour of consumers and their expectations in terms of value, choice and convenience. Following on from the financial crisis, it became apparent that growth rates in this area were considerably higher than in physical retail, which was burdened with increasing costs and stagnating sales. Accordingly, many retail firms began to recognise that in addition to the need to take decisive action in order to survive the ongoing economic uncertainty, there was also a need to adapt to longer-term structural shifts in the retail sector.

Electronic retailing, or ‘e-tailing’, involves the sale of goods and services via the internet or other electronic channel, for home or personal use (Harris and Dennis, 2002). Electronic retailing first emerged in the mid 1990s and right from the start, there was considerable optimism regarding the potential benefits that it could bring. Accordingly, many felt that it was only a matter of time before online shopping came to dominate the retail industry, which would invariably lead to the demise of traditional high streets stores (Doherty and Chadwick, 2010). One of the main reasons for this view was the perception that the internet provided an opportunity for product manufacturers to bypass traditional retailers and sell directly to consumers, in a process known as disintermediation (Benjamin and Wigand, 1995; Gellman, 1996). In addition, the internet was seen to provide a platform through which ‘virtual merchants’ with no prior experience of retailing could enter the market, by developing distribution models that were built entirely around online retailing

(Doherty, Ellis-Chadwick and Hart, 1999). Given the competitive advantages that such firms would have, it was expected that they would pose a particular threat to traditional distributions channels in retail (Stern and Weitz, 1998). In this sense, the rise of online shopping was seen as a form of 'disruptive' innovation, which had the potential to make existing business models obsolete (Burt and Sparks, 2003; Wrigley, Lowe and Currah, 2002). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was not long before huge sums of money were being invested in e-commerce firms, contributing to what became known as the 'dot.com bubble'. However, prophecies of a seismic upheaval proved unfounded and when the bubble burst in 2001, many digital retailers disappeared, never to be heard from again (Weitz, 2001).

With initial expectations regarding the impact of electronic retailing now tempered, there was a shift from viewing electronic retailing as a form of 'revolution', to viewing it as a form of 'evolution', wherein the internet was seen as a facilitating rather than a transformational technology (Weitz 2001). In this sense, while many major pure-play online retailers did survive through the collapse of the dot.com bubble, the underlying assumption that disintermediation would enable them to threaten and eventually supersede the market position of established retailers proved to be somewhat overstated (Hurt, 2007). Instead, during the early 2000s, the evolution of electronic retailing moved into a second, more sustainable phase, driven largely by established retail firms, who increasingly saw the opportunities that could come with selling goods through digital channels (Min and Wolfinburger, 2004).

This new operational model came to be known as 'multi-channel' or 'click-and-mortar' retailing (Steinfield, Bouwman and Adelaar, 2002; Steinfield et al., 2001; Currah, 2002) and, critically, enabled retailers to draw upon their existing supplier relationships, customer base, market knowledge and complementary assets to better exploit the benefits offered by online retailing (Steinfield, 2004). For established retailers, there were many reasons to be attracted to the multi-channel model. It gave them access to new markets; greater insight into consumer shopping behaviours; the ability to offer a wider selection of goods; improvements in the cost-efficiency of operations; improvements to customer communication and interaction; and the ability to offer a more personalised consumer experience (Srinivasan, Anderson and Kishore, 2002). In addition, electronic retailing enabled firms to overcome some of

the limitations that existed with traditional retailing, such as being accessible 24 hours a day and allowing consumers to shop from home (Weitz, 2006). It was also apparent that many consumers preferred the flexibility that came with the multi channel model, as they were able to use the internet as a tool for researching products and locating stores, as well as purchasing merchandise (Hahn and Kim, 2009).

One of the most significant impacts of the rise of multi-channel shopping was in the way retail firms marketed themselves and interacted with consumers. In addition to selling goods online, many retail firms increasingly used digital channels as a way to engage with consumers (Dennis, Ferech and Merrilees, 2004), with marketing in retail increasingly shifting from a 'one-to-many' to 'one-to-one' approach (Simmons, 2008). This shift saw consumers being targeted directly by retailers who offered them specific goods, services or offers based upon their past purchasing history. With the advent and growth of social media from the mid 2000s, this evolved further still with consumers being actively encouraged to engage with a variety of different forms of digital services along their shopping journey. In this sense, online retailing acted to strengthen the importance of branding in modern retailing (Burt, 2010), forming part of a wider shift that saw power increasingly move towards the consumer (Brynjolfsson and Smith, 2000; Kucuk and Krishnamurthy, 2007; Priluck, 2001; Rezabakhsh et al., 2006). Perhaps unsurprisingly, some of the most enthusiastic retailers to embrace digital retailing were those firms who already had a strong brand, but lacked the spatial penetration of a large store network (Weitz, 2006). At a wider scale, the growing importance of branding and marketing enabled large retail firms to reassert their dominance in the retail sector, at a time when wider technological and organisational advancements were allowing the biggest retailers to take on more 'forceful' role within the economy (Dawson, 2001). As such, the increasing returns associated with economies of scale, the growing internationalisation of operations and the increased brand awareness facilitated through new technology, enabled some retail firms to expand to such a degree that they came to be among the largest businesses in their respective countries (Dawson, 2006).

Within the UK context, in the early stages of multi-channel retailing, many firms' online offer tended to focus on home delivery services, wherein they provided a

direct alternative to the pure-play online retailers. Early entrants into the online market included the 'big 3' supermarkets, as well as several well known high street names, including Next, John Lewis, Marks and Spencer, Currys and WHSmith, all of whom had an online presence by the end of 2001 (Dixons Carphone, 2018; John Lewis Partnership, 2018; Marks & Spencer, 2018; Next, 2018; WHSmith, 2018). Operationally there was some variation in the way firms fulfilled orders; for example, Tesco chose to fulfil online grocery orders from their existing store network, whereas Asda and Sainsbury's initially chose to develop specialist fulfilment centres (Ferne, Fernie and Moore, 2003). Tesco in particular, invested heavily in promoting the home delivery of grocery shopping and by 2002, was the world's largest online grocery retailer (Ferne, Fernie and Moore, 2003). However, for all of the success that these retailers had, it soon became apparent that because of their higher operational costs, many high street chains could not compete on price with online-only businesses (Wrigley, Lowe and Currah, 2002). At the same time, evidence seemed to suggest that consumers actually preferred the faster and more convenient click-and-collect option that allowed them to order online for collection in store. Accordingly, from the mid-2000s, there was a growing shift towards the 'omni-channel' model of retailing, which emphasised the need to integrate the various channels, through which the retailers engaged with consumers.

On the back of this shift towards omni-channel, online retailing experienced significant growth in Britain and between 2002 and 2007, online retailing experienced an average annual growth rate of 28%, as compared to just 3.5% for the retail sector as a whole (CBRE, 2013). Following on from the economic downturn, the effect of this growth became more pronounced because, while the retail sector as a whole struggled with the effects of depressed consumer spending, internet retailing continued to boom, with the total value of online sales more than doubling between 2009 and 2012 (ONS, 2009, 2012). Accordingly, between January 2007 and January 2014, online sales as a proportion of total sales rose from 2.7% to 12.8% (Rhodes, 2015). The significance of this was that not only were retail firms now adapting their operational and organisational structures to support omni-channel, but increasingly their growth and expansion strategies too. Traditionally, retail firms had grown through store expansion programmes, with the emphasis being on expanding market coverage through a greater number of larger stores. However, in the new digital era,

this was no longer seen as viable, with the focus instead being on optimising store portfolios to provide the widest possible coverage, but without amassing unnecessary costs. Accordingly, many mature and established retailers increasingly sought to consolidate and optimise their store footprints, with store closures, relocations and ‘right-sizes’ becoming commonplace and store expansion programmes being significantly scaled back or stopped altogether. As a result, a new model of retail distribution emerged with retailers having a small number of flagship stores in prime locations, supported by a series of smaller satellite stores that offered limited sample range, but which were optimised for click-and-collect purchasing (Verdict and SAS, 2011). In this sense, new technology had effectively shattered the notion that a widespread store network was required to support sales growth and, as a result, retail performance was no longer bound up in a need to have an ever-greater presence in towns and cities up and down the country. Almost 50 years on from the start of retail decentralisation, it appeared as though Britain was now entering into a new era in retail, where the existing ‘rules’ of spatial form, distance minimisation and optimised location no longer applied.

9.7 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the evolution of retail and retail planning policy in Britain since the turn of the millennium, a period during which urban regeneration, social inclusion and new digital technology have come to have a defining influence over the retail sector. It has been shown that under New Labour, both urban regeneration and the need to provide socially inclusive retail came to have a significant influence over how planners handled proposals for new retail development. In doing so, this further strengthened the position of planners, who continued to hold that new retail development should be located in town centres and the existing retail hierarchy. As a result, retail-planning reform that was intended to make planning less ‘restrictive’ ultimately had little impact on the overarching stance of planners, who continued to enforce rigid regulatory interpretations of planning policy. Accordingly, by the end of the decade, it was clear that retail planning was continuing to base decision-making upon traditional theoretical, conceptual and ideological principles, even as it became apparent that new digital technologies were

starting to redefine not only the expectations of consumers, but also the operational, organisational and growth strategies of retail firms as well.

10 THE HISTORICAL INFLUENCES OF RETAIL PLANNING IN BRITAIN

10.1 Introduction

The preceding six chapters have explored in depth the evolution of retail and retail planning policy in Britain since the end of the Second World War, against a backdrop of wider changes in society, politics and the economy. In doing so, they have sought to establish the historical context in which retail planning has evolved, in order to enable the identification of those pervasive and omnipresent influences over decision making in planning. The purpose of this chapter is to build upon this, by examining and exploring these influences in detail, such that the likely extent to which they continue to impact upon the behaviour of planners today can be ascertained. The chapter begins by identifying the primary considerations that have impacted upon decision-making in retail planning in the past (section 10.2), before considering how these can be understood within the context of path dependence, to reflect pervasive strands of conceptual and ideological influence (section 10.3). The chapter concludes by proposing cognitive and psychological factors play an important role in this regard, arguing that both risk-aversion and emotion should be considered important influences over decision making in retail planning (section 10.4).

10.2 Decision Making in Retail Planning

As was noted in the introduction, the purpose of this chapter is to identify and examine those pervasive influences that have shaped the practice of retail planning throughout its historical evolution. In this regard, the intention is to delve below the easily discernible influences that impact upon day-to-day decision making, in order to explore the deeper influences that inherently shape the way decisions are made. However, before exploring the deeper influences in retail planning, it is first worth establishing the largely self-evident considerations that have influenced decision making in retail planning over the course of its history.

10.2.1 **The Key Considerations in Retail Planning**

In seeking to establish the overt considerations that influence decision-making in retail planning, it is first necessary to determine what is meant by an ‘overt’ influence. Overt influences relate to any consideration that is regularly and consciously understood and factored into the decision making process by planners, as part of the development of retail planning strategy, or in assessing a retail planning application. In this sense, overt considerations should not be seen to include those occasional considerations that are particular to a specific application, location or juncture, but rather to those recurring factors that influence decision-making in retail planning as a whole. Based upon the historical overview provided in the preceding chapters, several key, overt considerations are identifiable in this regard.

Statutory Framework of Planning

Arguably, the most important influence over decision making in retail planning is the statutory framework of the planning system and the various mechanisms through which planning operates. Under English law, all land-use planning decisions have to be made in accordance with the operational and structural principles set out of planning legislation, which are legally enshrined in England through Acts of Parliament. While the statutory framework and mechanisms of planning can and do change over time, such changes tend to be infrequent and relatively minor. Since 1947, the statutory framework for planning in England has remained largely unchanged and today, planning decisions must be made in accordance with the Town and Country Planning Act, 1990, as modified by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004.

Planning Policy Guidance

While the statutory framework of planning serves to establish the legal boundaries of the planning system, the actual practice of planning and the decisions made by local planners, are largely governed through planning guidance. Planning guidance for retail is published periodically by central government, usually in the form of a formal guidance note, best-practice document or similar. In addition, parliamentary questions, ministerial statements and debate can expand national guidance, while on some occasions, parliamentary enquiries or externally commissioned reports may be conducted into specific issues. Amendments to planning guidance are usually preceded by an evaluation period, during which time an assessment of the effectiveness, operations, limitations and impacts of existing policy will be conducted. Following this, senior civil servants will draft amendments to policy in line with identified issues and/or wider government objectives, before opening it up to consultation with a wide variety of public, private and community interests. Once consultation had been completed, updates and amendments to policy will be finalised, before being published as official guidance.

While planning guidance is not legally binding, local authorities are expected to adhere to its principles in the formulation of development plans and in making planning decisions. Similarly, while retail planning guidance forms the primary point of reference for land-use planning decisions in regard of retail, this guidance sits alongside a wider policy framework that can have relevance to retail planning decisions. Broadly speaking, the primary additional areas of guidance that are relevant to retail are the environment, sustainable development and transport. While the core emphasis of guidance can change over time, evidence presented in the preceding chapter suggests that since the early 1990s the main considerations in retail guidance have remained largely unchanged, namely:

- Promoting sustainable development
- Enhancing the vitality and viability of town centres
- Supporting accessible and environmentally conscious development
- Supporting an efficient, competitive and innovative retail sector

In addition to these broad objectives, specific material considerations may also be relevant in certain cases. While these material considerations can and do vary,

planning guidance has repeatedly identified several key considerations that are likely to be relevant to retail, most notably urban regeneration, employment creation, social inclusion and economic growth. Similarly, in order to support the achievement of broader policy objectives, planning guidance has presented planners with series of policy ‘tools’, which can be used to help local authorities enforce its core principles. Since the mid 1990s, these have remained largely unchanged, and include the sequential test, needs test and impact assessment.

Local Development Plans

Since 1947, the primary tool of planning in England has been the Local Development Plan, which sets out the strategic spatial strategy for development within the local area. This ‘plan-led’ system remains and the present day system of development planning operates within the legislative framework established in the Town and Country Planning Act, 1990, as modified by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004. While the exact form, function and scale of development plans has changed over time, the central premise that underpins them has remained unchanged. Local authorities are expected to plan ‘positively’ for future development in a manner that not only supports local economic and social objectives, but also wider government policy. Local development plans are developed in accordance with planning policy guidance published by central government, which sets out the basic framework, operational practices and policy requirements of the development plan. However, local authorities are expected to tailor their local development plan towards specific local and regional objectives, which should be done in a positive and pro-active way that engages with a variety of local stakeholders, including private business, local community groups and the voluntary sector. In this sense, while the statutory framework, operational practices and policy requirements of local development plans are uniform across the country, the development plan system is intended to be inherently flexible and therefore locally specific.

Within the context of planning for retail development, the local development plan serves as the primary point of reference for assessing retail-planning applications. Within the local development plan, local authorities are expected to set out a long-term strategic framework for retail development, including the identification of suitable areas for new development and areas where development is prohibited. Since

the mid-1990s, the central component of this system has been the retail hierarchy, which identifies all existing retail centres within the local area, including town centres, district centres, local centres and neighbourhood parades. In establishing a hierarchy of centres, local planning authorities are expected to abide by principles within wider planning guidance, such that the proposed spatial strategy for retail development within the local development plan, supports both local and national policy objectives. In line with this, there has been a tendency to exclude retail parks, out-of-town shopping centres and standalone grocery superstores from the hierarchy, in order to preclude such areas from being targeted for new development.

Strategic and Operational Practices of Retail Firms

While all land-use planning decisions made in regard of retail development are fundamentally governed by the statutory framework of the planning system in England, it is important to remember that any development that does occur only does so because a developer, retailer or other private interest has determined it to be strategically desirable and economically viable. In this sense, while planning legislation, policy guidance and local development plans may serve as the primary considerations in decision making in retail planning, the very need for a decision to be made in the first place, exists only because of the strategic and operational practices of retail firms. The influence of these strategic and operational practices has been clearly illustrated in the preceding chapters and can be most manifestly seen in the process of retail decentralisation, which has not only had a profound impact upon the spatial distribution of retail in Britain, but also the conceptual and operational foundations of retail planning. In this sense, while the strategic and operational practices of retail firms may not be a consideration in the conventional sense of the word, they do serve as a powerful constraining force over the manner in which decision-making in retail planning occurs.

10.2.2 Tensions and Conflict in Retail Planning

In general, land-use planning decisions made in regard of retail development follow a standard process. In simple terms, decisions should be made solely on the merits of a planning application, which will be considered in terms of its compliance to the existing local development plan, which will have itself been formulated in accordance with national planning policy guidance. In instances when proposals

deviate from the development plan, there are policy tools that can be used to assess an application's appropriateness, including impact assessment and the sequential test. Underlying all of this is the ability of planners to factor in relevant 'material considerations', which have the ability to fundamentally change the outcome of planning decisions in certain instances. In this sense, it is arguable that the system should operate in a fairly efficient, equitable and consistent manner, with local authorities being afforded sufficient power to control negative development, while at the same time being afforded sufficient flexibility to be responsive to the needs of local communities and business interests. The reality is, however, that the operation of retail planning in England has been anything but efficient, equitable and consistent and, as has been illustrated in the preceding chapters, conflict and confusion have been far more common.

In seeking to determine why this has been the case, it is important to note that while the flexibility of the system is intended to enable more responsive local decision making, it also creates an element of uncertainty, by leaving certain aspects of policy guidance open to interpretation. At the same time, the very nature of planning is predicated upon the idea of balance, in that an effective planning system will seek to balance the interests of various different groups against one another for the betterment of society. Historically, this need for balance has been dependent upon the wider contextual circumstances in which decision-making has taken place, which has meant that, far from having consistent and stable objectives, the objectives of retail planning have actually varied over time, being fundamentally influenced by factors ranging from the incumbent political party in power, to the state of the economy or dominant consumer trends. As a result, retail planning in England is inherently fraught with contradictions and tensions, which not only impact upon the way it operates, but also impact upon the efficiency, equity and consistency of its decision making outcomes (Davies, 1984, 2004; Dawson, 1980; Guy, 1980, 2007).

Efficiency vs. Equity

Arguably, the most apparent tension that exists in retail planning is between the economic and social goals of planning. Planning guidance has repeatedly emphasised that planners should look to support a competitive, innovative and efficient retail sector, yet at the same time, it has also emphasised the need to make sure that new

development accords with broader social and environmental objectives, which has usually required it to be located within the existing retail hierarchy. From an economic standpoint, development outside of the retail hierarchy is considered preferential because it is more efficient and profitable for retail firms. In this sense, by enacting a restrictive, regulatory stance, it has been argued that planners have acted to inhibit competition, stifle innovation and reduce productivity, which has resulted in poorer choice and increased costs for consumers (Cheshire and Hilber, 2014; Evans and Hartwich, 2007; McKinsey Institute, 1998; Morton and Dericks, 2013). The viewpoint of planners has generally been that to allow new development away from existing centres threatens the vitality and viability of town centres and the wider retail hierarchy, which comes at the risk of damaging social cohesion and excluding deprived and marginalised groups, effectively creating a two-tier provision of retail. Historical evidence suggests for most of the last 50 years, the social case has tended to win out in these decisions.

Centralisation vs. Decentralisation

Aligned to the tension between the economic and social goals of planning, is the issue of whether retail development should be allowed to decentralise in accordance with market forces. While this tension can be viewed in terms of being an equity vs. efficiency debate, it is perhaps more significant in terms of the issue of urban sprawl. One of the main arguments in favour of town-centre-first is that it is necessary in order to prevent a hollowing out of the CBD, as has occurred in many American cities (Pacione, 2009). At the same time, one of the fundamental objectives of town planning has been to prevent urban sprawl and rapid outward expansion into rural areas, so it is argued that to allow decentralisation to occur unabated would be counter to these objectives. Yet, as has been highlighted previously, attempts to control the outward movement of main town centre functions have tended to focus only on retail (Findlay and Sparks, 2014), with many town and city centres having suffered from a loss of both jobs and residents over the last 50 years. As a result, the relative importance of retail in many town centres has increased significantly and while policies aimed at reversing these trends have become common since the 1990s, the decentralisation vs. recentralisation debate has increasingly found in favour of town centre development.

Innovation vs. Tradition

As noted previously, planning guidance advocates that one of the main objectives of retail planning should be to support a competitive, innovative and efficient retail sector. Historical evidence suggests, however, that there has been a tendency for planners to support existing 'traditional' forms of retail at the expense of new 'innovative' forms. The tension between innovation and tradition is most evident in the debate surrounding out-of-centre development, which is often regarded as being more accessible, more efficient and more conducive to the needs of modern consumers. Despite this, planning has tended to impose restrictions on such development, often on the basis that it would pose a threat to traditional retail environments. This stance has often been justified on social or environmental grounds, however, it has been argued that such an approach can result in the existing spatial provision of retail becoming 'fossilised', which acts to protect otherwise 'weak' firms (Guy and Bennison, 2007; Wood, Lowe and Wrigley, 2006). In this sense, rather than promoting innovation, the tendency towards town-centre-first has resulted in the preservation of otherwise outmoded retail spaces, which no longer accord with contemporary patterns of consumer behaviour or expectations in terms of physical infrastructure and offer.

State vs. Market

The tension between the state and the market in retail planning stems from debate about who has the requisite knowledge and expertise to determine the most appropriate location, scale and format of retail provision. While this can be viewed as being aligned to both the efficiency vs. equity and centralisation vs. decentralisation debates, it perhaps more accurately reflects a tension over who should have the ultimate power in determining the form, function and spatial pattern of retail. Retailers argue that the decisions they make are a response to market forces and the demands of consumers and, as such, should be considered the will of the people. Planners tend to counter this by arguing that the inherent tendency of capitalist forces to lead to inequality and disadvantage means that their actions are necessary in order to counter-balance the negative externalities of the free-market. Historically, this debate has tended to end in favour of the state; however, during the 1980s, market forces were afforded greater scope to determine the scale, location and format of

retail provision in Britain, due to a more liberal planning stance in central government.

Local vs. National

This tension reflects the debate around the level at which strategic decisions in regard of retail-development should occur. While the planning system in England is intended to allow local authorities to tailor locally specific strategies for development, since the 1990s, retail-planning decisions at the local level have tended to follow national guidance almost exactly. In many ways, this reflects the coherence between the viewpoints of central government and local authorities regarding the best strategic approach; however, this has created particular tension with retailers and developers who argue that it does not consider what is in the best interests of local businesses, consumer and communities. The increased complexity of planning guidance can be seen to have inhibited local flexibility and, as a result, it has been argued that decision making in regard of retail has become increasingly centralised (Guy, 2007). That this has occurred at a time when there has been a push towards greater localised decision-making only further clouds the issue, although historical evidence would suggest that since the 1990s, planners have been more than willing to abide by national guidance on retail planning matters.

Flexibility vs. Consistency

Aligned to the debate regarding national vs. local strategic decision-making, is the tension between the need for consistency and flexibility. On the one hand, local authorities are encouraged to plan 'positively' for new retail development, with the emphasis being on working in partnership with local business, communities and public service providers to create locally specific, flexible strategies for development. On the other hand, the historical practice of planning for retail development has been repeatedly criticised for lacking consistency and coherence in the way decisions are made. The increasing complexity of planning guidance and the tendency towards greater centralisation in decision-making seems to suggest that the government would prefer greater consistency; however, they equally advocate and call for local authorities to be more pro-active and positive in the way they plan for their local areas. Interestingly, while there has been considerable inconsistency in the way individual decisions have been made, since the 1990s, the centrality of town-

centre-first within retail planning has led to remarkable continuity in the overall strategic approaches of local authorities.

Regulation of Land-Use vs. Regulation of Business

In simple terms, planning is supposed to be concerned with how land is used and not with who uses it. Yet, in the context of retail development, it is arguable that since the 1990s, issues relating to competition, monopoly power, consumer choice and value have become more central to decision making. This has been particularly the case in the grocery sector, which has been subject to multiple competition investigations since the turn of the millennium (Competition Commission, 2000, 2003, 2008). While planners would argue that the decisions they make are in no way influenced by the retailer behind a proposal, it is arguable that levels of community opposition and the existing provision of comparable retail both have a significant impact upon planning decisions. In this regard, the tension between whether planning should focus solely on land-use issues or whether it should consider wider competitive issues, is a particular point of contention in retail planning.

Positive Planning vs. Regulatory Planning

The plan-led system that operates in England is supposed to promote proactive strategic planning, where local authorities are encouraged to work in partnership with local businesses, community groups and public service providers to plan positively for future development. However, in the context of retail planning, it has become common for local authorities to adopt a regulatory control approach to new development. In this sense, rather than pro-actively planning for new development through an objective assessment of locational need, planners have tended to use national planning guidance as a means to guide new development into existing centres. As such, retail planning has increasingly been characterised by a negative approach that aims to limit the amount of out of centre development, rather than a positive approach, which seeks to support town centre and hierarchical development. It has been argued that part of the reason for this is the increasing complexity of planning guidance, which acts to inhibit planners from being positive and pro-active, because it requires increased expertise and greater resources at the local level (Guy, 2007). Whatever the case, the government have repeatedly emphasised that planners

should look to be more positive in their approach, including accepting new forms of retail development in certain instances.

10.3 Path Dependence in Retail Planning

The preceding section has examined the core, overt influences over decision making in retail planning, in addition to exploring the inherent tensions that exist within the decision making process. As such, it has shown that even though planning for retail development is intended to be consistent and objective, in reality it has been characterised by considerable conflict over what interests should take priority and whose point-of-view matters most. Yet, for all of this tension and conflict, there has been remarkable continuity in how certain aspects of decision-making have occurred. The purpose of this next section is to build upon this assertion, by assessing whether this continuity can be considered evidence of path dependence and, if so, to identify the specific institutional arrangements, processes and beliefs that may potentially influence decision-making in retail planning today.

10.3.1 Theory and Method: The Conceptual Influences of Retail Planning

In seeking to identify those pervasive influences over retail planning in England, it is worth starting with the underlying theoretical and conceptual ideas that have informed the expectations of planners when it comes to both the spatial pattern of retail and the broader spatial structure of urban environments. As was illustrated in Chapter 4, there are arguably three key theoretical foundations that define how planners understand the spatial pattern of retail: that urban environments have a clearly defined and replicable spatial structure; that the spatial structure of retail takes the form of an ordered hierarchy of central places; and that this structure and order is based upon the principles of economic efficiency. These foundations were central to many of the conceptual models of urban morphology that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century and, in many ways, were inherently attractive because they were both logically sound and stood up well when compared to real world evidence. As planning grew in stature during the 1950s and 1960s, these conceptual ideas became firmly embedded within planning, as the optimal spatial pattern for retail provision and, accordingly, impacted upon the strategic approaches that planners adopted in this regard.

These foundations soon came under pressure, however, due to perceived weaknesses in their empirical, theoretical and conceptual robustness. Broadly speaking, these challenges came in the form of three distinct, albeit inter-related strands. Firstly, from the late 1960s, the emergence of retail decentralisation and new forms of retail development challenged the basic assumption that the retail hierarchy provided the optimal spatial pattern of retail provision. Secondly, from the early 1970s, there was growing criticism of traditional economic models such as Central Place Theory, which were deemed empirically inaccurate. Thirdly, from the early 1990s, there was a significant expansion of research into the geography of retail, as the traditions of the discipline increasingly coalesced with broader areas of study including consumption, globalisation and the circulation of ideas, knowledge, technology and capital. Notably, this introduced new theoretical and conceptual ideas regarding the spatial pattern of retail and the various forces that influenced it.

Despite these challenges to their legitimacy, the underlying theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning have remained steadfast, with planners exhibiting remarkable continuity in the way they have applied these principles. In fact, it is arguable that the relative strength of these foundations has actually increased over time, not only as they have become firmly embedded in the collective consciousness of planners, but also as they have become enshrined within planning policy guidance. Accordingly, it could be argued that this continuity points to the conceptual and theoretical foundations that underpin retail planning having become path dependent. The question is why does planning continue to believe that retail development should accord to these foundations, and what is it that has enabled these influences to become so pervasive?

The first real threat to the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning came in the 1960s and 1970s, with the emergence of new forms of retailing, which challenged the idea that an ordered hierarchy represented the most efficient spatial pattern of retail provision. In considering why the emergence of new forms of retail did not lead to an alteration in the foundations of retail planning, it is worth considering the assertion of Pierson (2000) that certain institutions act to reproduce themselves through a process of 'positive feedback'. In the case of planning, it is arguable that because structure, order and efficiency were considered the 'natural'

attributes of urban environments, regulatory control policies based upon them, ultimately served to ‘naturalise’ them within the state apparatus of planning (Hierbert, 2000). In this sense, the behaviour of planners acted to reinforce the concept of an idealised natural urban form, even if the realities of urban development did not conform:

“The irony, however, is that supply side decision takers are influenced by and hostage to extant conceptualizations with all their unrealistic supply side assumptions... in these circumstances, it is little wonder that the empirical record is broadly supportive of the hypothesized patterns of retail activity. The hypothesized patterns, after all, influence the outcome of the empirical record” (Brown, 1992, p209)

From the 1970s onwards, the underlying conceptual ideas were further reinforced in the way planners strategised and made decisions, because, following the introduction of retail planning guidance, they actually became codified as the ‘correct’ way that development should occur within national planning policy (Guy, 1980, 2007). In the 1990s, their position was strengthened further still, when they were tied to broader social and environmental considerations, with planners effectively acting to negate the argument that the retail hierarchy was economically inefficient, because its legitimacy now came from it being the most environmentally friendly and socially just spatial pattern. In this sense, not only did positive feedback and self-reproduction help to maintain continuity, but also gradual institutional change, which acted to strengthen the position of the theoretical and conceptual foundations, by enabling their legitimacy and rationale to align with wider government objectives.

The preceding explanation for how the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning have been able to pervade, in spite of the emergence of new ‘disruptive’ forms of retail, speaks to a process of positive feedback and self-reproduction, as well as a reinforcement of legitimacy through gradual institutional change. What is particularly interesting about this, however, is that it was only because of an initial resistance to change by planners that this was able to occur. As was illustrated in Chapter 5, in the early years of retail decentralisation, there were no formal planning tools to control out-of-centre retail development. Instead,

planners pro-actively chose to resist new development based on its non-conformity to underlying theoretical and conceptual principles. In considering why this may have been the case, it is arguable that the economic principle of increasing returns may have been significant. According to Pierson (2000), the principle of increasing returns holds that when the costs associated with change are too great, it results in a tendency towards the status quo, such that a policy step in one direction invariably leads to another in the same direction. If we consider that in the post-war decades, local authorities spent considerable amounts of money and time redeveloping the central areas of their towns and cities, it follows that any change in strategic approach would not only be costly in terms of the requirement for further investment in new retail spaces outside of these locations, but also in terms of the relative loss that would occur on investments already made. In this sense, even if planners accepted that new retail spaces had a sound theoretical and conceptual basis, they would likely be resistant to change due to the prohibitive costs of doing so.

In assessing the continuity of traditional theoretical and conceptual principles in planning, despite their rejection in mainstream academia it is arguable that, once again, various explanations for path dependence can be determined. By the 1980s, research into location in retail comprised of two distinct strands, with research in geography focusing primarily upon the spatial patterns themselves, locational analysis and land-use planning; and research in management and marketing focusing primarily upon the strategic and operational practises of retail firms (Clarke, Bennison and Pal, 1997). With the demise of spatial science, research in geography went through something of a lull and it was at this point that planning practice began to veer away from academia. It was not until the 1990s that there was a resurgence of interest the geography of retailing, particularly within the UK (see for example: Crewe, 2000, 2001, 2003; Crang, 1996; Marsden and Wrigley, 1995; Wrigley, 1992, 1993, 1998; Wrigley and Lowe, 1996, 2002; Wrigley, Lowe and Currah, 2002). By this time however, the focus of research in geography had widened considerably, with retailing now taking a central position within much broader areas of study including consumption, globalisation, and the circulation of ideas, knowledge, technology and capital. As a result, the relative validity of traditional theoretical and conceptual principles was all but erased, not only because of flaws in their underlying assumptions, but also because of their increasingly evident theoretical and

conceptual limitations (Clarke, Bennison and Pal, 1997; Wrigley, Lowe and Currah, 2002).

Yet, within planning, these ideas remained. While it is arguable that the pervasiveness of traditional theoretical and conceptual ideas could be explained simply by the fact that, as planning practice drifted away from academia, it was less exposed to new theoretical and conceptual explanations of retail location, it is also likely that the increasing ‘costs’ that would come with such a profound shift, were likely to be a huge disincentive to change. Planners would have to be retrained, policies would need to be re-written and local development plans would need to be significantly amended, and that is not even considering the likely impact upon other related areas of planning such as transport and the environment. It is also arguable that planners would have been inherently resistant to new ideas, because they had the potential to threaten their authoritative position in regard of urban environments. Following Gains, John and Stocker (2005), it is arguable that planners would have deemed it was in their best interests, to resist change, in order to maintain the status quo in their favour. Planning had long been considered a technocratic exercise conducted by experts and, as such, any challenges to the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning would be a challenge to the knowledge and expertise of planners, which ran the risk of undermining their authority:

“Professional groups have long established claims to knowledge and are immersed in a setting of highly complex interactions among their peers. If new standards and practices threaten to disrupt these interactions and professional boundaries by disseminating control, professionals tend to resist” (Barnes, Gartland and Stack, 2004, p373)

This explanation for path dependency in retail planning is highly compelling and, in the context of more contemporary challenges, highly relevant. As was illustrated in Chapter 2, retail planning today is inherently threatened by forces that challenge its underlying theoretical and conceptual foundations of structure, order and efficiency. However, in comparison to previous threats that have challenged the foundations of retail planning, the emergence of new digital technology has the potential to challenge the very theoretical and conceptual foundations of urban spaces more

widely. As new technology is acting to reduce the ‘friction of distance’, this serves to breakdown the underlying rationale for the hierarchical ordering of functions in town and cities, which developed historically to overcome time constraints by minimising distance constraints (Graham and Marvin, 1996; Graham, 1997). In simple terms, the clustering of retail in central locations enabled consumers to make multiple purchases within a single location, thus minimising distance travelled and therefore saving time. However, as new technology increasingly eliminates distance as a variable in the way people shop, it has been suggested that the rise of the internet could herald the end of the *raison d’être* for towns and cities (Cairncross, 2001; Mitchell, 1995, Negroponte, 1995):

“Communication technologies will dissolve the glue that holds our cities together, in that more and more of the traditional roles and functions that first generated the need for urban concentration can be achieved at a distance” (Marvin, Gillespie and Green, 2001, p206)

While such prophecies may be a little hyperbolic, for planners it does pose a very particular conceptual question: how are urban interrelationships to be understood, if they are not fundamentally based upon the principles of size and distance? In such a climate, it is easy to understand why planners have been resistant to change and why they have sought to reinforce and reproduce the institutional arrangements in retail planning that serve to validate their position.

As this section has shown, there is not only strong evidence of path dependence in relation to the conceptual and theoretical foundations of retail planning, but there are also multiple overlapping and interlinked explanations as to why this has occurred. Notably, these different explanations do not exist in isolation of one another and the highly interlinked processes through which the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning have become embedded, speak to the inherently complex way in which path dependence can be seen to have evolved.

10.3.2 Planners as Protectors of the People: The Ideological Influence of Retail Planning

The preceding section has considered the pervasiveness of certain theoretical and conceptual principles in retail planning and, in doing so, has shown strong evidence

of path dependence. However, it is apparent from the preceding chapters that path dependence extends beyond the underlying conceptual foundations of retail planning, with evident continuity in its ideological foundations too. In this sense, it is arguable that retail-planning exhibits evidence of path dependence in terms what it considers its fundamental role and function to be. This pervasiveness is particularly notable given that over the course of its historical evolution there have been significant changes in society, politics and the economy, which have all affected how retail planning operates.

In considering how certain ideological principles have become enshrined within retail planning, it is worth considering again, how the role of planning has evolved since its inception. As was shown in Chapter 4, the ideological origins of town planning lie in the work of industrial philanthropists in the 19th century, who wanted to improve the living conditions of the working classes in Britain. This movement spurred on visionaries who conceptualised a better world in which planned urban settlements gave people the life they deserved. In this sense, the very ideological foundations of planning were rooted in the desire to create ‘utopian’ settlements that fundamentally changed the lives of people for the better. At the same time, there was also a strong emphasis on the need to find a balance between supporting economic growth and the need to constrain urban development, so that it did not damage Britain’s countryside. In fact, this latter objective was arguably so central to the ideological position of town planning in its formative years, that the very name of the practice drew a defined distinction between ‘town’ and ‘country’ planning. By the early twentieth century, therefore, three key ideological principles had thus become enshrined within planning. Firstly, that the fundamental objective of planning was the improve the living conditions of people in Britain; secondly, that the need for this stemmed from the tendency of unrestrained capitalism to lead to uneven and inequitable patterns of development; and thirdly, that planning should look to constrain urban development and minimise urban sprawl, so as to protect the countryside.

By the end of the Second World War, however, it was arguable that external forces fundamentally began to redefine the role of planning, not least the government, who sought to realign the planning system with their broader objectives in terms of

economic and urban development. In this sense, it has been suggested that from initially having clearly defined and coherent ideological principles, as planning moved into the second half of the twentieth century, its operation became inherently 'contested', with the government now attempting to reconcile differing socio-political ideologies (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2009; Hay, 1996; Inch, 2009; Offe, 1984), which were distinct from and separate to the underlying ideological foundations of planning itself. Accordingly, in charting its historical evolution in Britain, it is clear that the operation of planning has been replete with trade-offs, which have resulted in frequent criticisms regarding how it operates (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 2000; Thornley, 1993). Within this context, various attempts to reform planning can be seen as attempts to try to reconcile the competing and contradicting objectives of various socio-political ideologies (Prior, 2005). As such, it has been argued that planning should be understood as the product of the distinctive political, administrative and legal forces within a country's constitution (Booth, 1993) and, in this sense, can be considered nothing more than a 'cultural' construct that exists to serve a subset of political, institutional or ideological interests (Friedman, 2005; Porter, 2007; Sandercock, 2004). Given this, it is arguable that while planning should operate and function according to its own inherent ideological principles, its actual operation has more closely aligned to the principles of government, which has resulted in a tendency for planning to reinforce the dominant socio-political ideology of the ruling establishment.

Despite this, it is evident that certain underlying ideological principles have been able to pervade, not least the belief that new retail development should be located within town and city centres because they are the most efficient, equitable and environmentally appropriate locations. In order to understand why this has been the case, it is first necessary to consider how changes in the socio-political ideology of government have affected the role, purpose and objectives of retail planning over time. In the three decades following on from the Second World War, during what could be termed the 'social-democratic' phase, the government were broadly supportive of Keynesian redistributive economic principles and the need to rebuild the urban fabric of Britain. During this era, planners sought to balance the government's desire to open up British retail to the principles of American consumer democracy, with the need to promote development that was supportive of the

reconstruction of town and city centres. In the 1980s and early 1990s, during what could be termed the 'market-orientated' phase, the broader objective of government was to support private enterprise in driving economic growth, so that the government could take a less hands on approach in the economy. During this era, planners sought to balance the government's desire to 'liberalise' planning, against maintaining support for existing retail centres, which were being particularly impacted as retail decentralisation accelerated. In the new millennium, during what could be termed the 'third way' phase, the emphasis of government was on blending the ideals of neo-liberalism with the principles of sustainability and the need to create socially just and economically prosperous communities. During this era, planners sought to balance the need to promote economic growth and urban regeneration, against a need to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres and promote socially inclusive retail environments.

What each of these three distinct phases shows, is that no matter the dominant socio-political ideology of government, there has always been a concerted effort by planners to make sure that new retail development occurs within town centres. At certain times, this position has accorded well with the broader objectives of government, which has made it easier to enforce; however, at other times, it has been necessary for planners to 'fight back' against wider socio-political forces that have sought to facilitate development outside of town centres. Whatever the case, the pervasiveness of the view that town centres remain the correct location for retail development, points once more to decision-making in retail planning having become path dependent. The question is why do planners believe that retail development should accord to these underlying ideological principles and what is it that has enabled these influences to become so pervasive?

As was noted above, the view that town centres are the most appropriate location for retail development can be seen to be rooted in the ideological origins of planning, and the underlying belief that these locations are not only the most economically efficient, but also the most socially and environmentally just. As such, support for town centres and the wider retail hierarchy has a lot to do with the belief that development in these locations will enable planners to meet their obligations in terms of protecting local people and the environment from the dangers of unrestrained

economic forces. In this sense, it is arguable that in retail planning, there is a dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ development that is essentially defined in spatial terms, wherein development within the retail hierarchy is viewed as inherently good and development outside of it is viewed as inherently bad. While it would be foolish to suggest that such a dichotomy exists at all times and in all cases, evidence from the preceding chapters points to such a distinction serving as a common and well used heuristic in decision making. The pervasiveness of this view and the remarkable continuity in its enforcement, points to decision making in retail planning having become path dependent, especially when it is considered that wider socio-political and economic forces have repeatedly acted against it.

In considering why this dichotomy between good and bad retail development has been able to pervade in retail planning, it is worth returning to the suggestion by Pierson (2000) that certain institutional arrangements, processes and beliefs, self-reproduce over time, through a process of positive feedback. In the case of retail planning, it is arguable that the underlying ideological foundations of town-centre-first have been repeatedly reinforced over time, such that the institutional arrangements associated with it, have become embedded in both the collective consciousness of planners and the state apparatus of planning. For example, one of the main changes brought about through the passing of the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947, was the nationalisation of development rights, which arguably served to reinforce the perception of planners that it was their responsibility to control for uneven and inequitable patterns of development. Similarly, the growth of the post-war planning ideal and the great faith that was put in planning by the government at this time, likely reinforced the belief of planners that they were the best-qualified people to plan urban environments that would provide citizens with an improved quality of life.

One particularly interesting form of positive feedback can be seen in the way that a repeated link has been drawn between town centre and retail planning. For example, if we consider that until the 1970s, planning guidance for retail and planning guidance for town centres were effectively one-and-the-same, it is easy to see how the underlying ideological position of planners could be reinforced, especially as guidance often drew an inextricable link between the two:

“... the town centre is much more than a shopping centre. But if it lost its attraction as a shopping centre it could hardly survive as a town centre in a wider sense” (MHLG, 1963, para 3)

Even after standalone guidance for retail was introduced in 1972, we can see a slow reestablishment of the link between retail and town centres, not only in terms of the content of guidance, but also in their titles too. While the original 1972 guidance should have marked a definitive split between the two, given that the guidance was titled *Out of Town Shops and Shopping Centres*, what happened instead was that with each successive guidance note, this distinction became less pronounced, until eventually, it disappeared altogether. Thus in 1977, the ‘out-of-town’ was dropped in favour of *Large New Stores*, which became *Major Retail Development* in 1988, *Town Centres and Retail Developments* in 1993 and 1996 and finally just *Planning for Town Centres* in 2005. In this sense, whether intentional or not, the name of planning guidance can be argued to have actively reinforced the underlying ideological view of planners, that retail development should be, in most circumstances, located in town centres.

Another form of positive feedback that can be considered important, relates to the introduction of development plans, which arguably served to reinforce the notion that urban environments were inherently stable. As such, this would have accorded with the belief of planners that town centres were the most efficient and equitable locations for retail development, because they had served this role for centuries previously. There would be no reason for planners to expect change to occur naturally, especially as planning guidance often drew explicit attention to this stability:

“...the basic use pattern in the centre of most towns has developed slowly, will normally change slowly and can be regarded as broadly settled” (MHLG, 1962, para 93)

Taking this idea further and drawing upon Mahoney’s (2000) suggestion that path dependence reflects “historical sequences in which contingent events set in motion institutional patterns or event chains that have deterministic properties” (p507), it could be argued that the contingent instance in which the retail hierarchy was first

enshrined within the local development plan, subsequently set in motion a sequence of events, each of which positively fed back into and reinforced this original hierarchy. As successive iterations of the development plan will have acted to guide new development into the retail hierarchy, not only did this further embedded the ideological value of the existing hierarchy, but based upon Pierson's (2000) argument of increasing returns, made it increasingly less likely that change would occur. Of course, the great irony of this, is that the inherently defined stability that pervades in retail planning runs counter to frequently quoted aphorism that 'the only constant in retail is change' (Brown, 2002).

The significance of positive feedback is that not only has it acted to reinforce and reproduce underlying ideological principles, but it has also acted to establish a certain way of making decisions, which is inherently defined around long-term objectives. In this sense, the focus of planning has increasingly emphasised the importance of achieving specific aims or objectives, rather than understanding processes of change and responding to them accordingly. The result of this is that planning has become highly prescriptive, seeking to enforce upon urban environments specific expectations in terms of structure, form and usage. Rather than planners acknowledging and seeking to understand processes of change in retail, such as retail decentralisation, they have simply focused upon the need to make sure that new retail development conforms to the existing retail hierarchy, as this is the 'expected' spatial pattern of retail. Of course, as the preceding chapters have shown, this approach has come in for increasing criticism since the 1970s; however, it is arguable that in the period since, planning has continued to adhere to this approach, albeit in a more regulatory control capacity. As such, rather than asking the question of why retail wants to deviate from the existing hierarchy in the first place, for almost its entire history, retail planning has simply focussed upon shoehorning retail developments into a spatial pattern that accords with its own underlying ideological principles.

In considering the history of retail planning, it is clear that there are numerous instances when positive feedback has led to a reinforcement and reproduction of institutional arrangements, processes and beliefs that are fundamentally based upon underlying ideological principles. However, it is important to note that sometimes the

reproduction of institutions that support these ideological principles can occur in other areas of planning. In fact, arguably one of the most important instances of positive feedback that has reinforced the idea that town centres are the best location for retail development, can be seen to relate to the designation of, and subsequent growth in importance of greenbelts around major towns and cities. Greenbelts were introduced as a means to control the outward expansion of major urban areas in Britain and, as their introduction broadly coincided with the emergence of retail decentralisation, it is arguable that this acted to reinforce the perception in planning that suburban retail development was an inherently bad thing. A similar process of positive feedback occurred during the early 1990s, when sustainable development emerged as a pressing priority for both planning and the government. As sustainable development was inherently defined as being environmentally conscious development, it followed that any development that promoted the use of cars, such as was the case with many suburban retail schemes, would be viewed in a negative light.

The examples provided above, show how the pervasiveness of certain ideological principles in retail planning can be explained by the processes of positive feedback and increasing returns, which have acted to reproduce existing institutional arrangements, processes and beliefs, in support of town centres and the existing retail hierarchy. In this regard, it is evident that path dependence has occurred through a process of gradual institutional change, wherein the underlying ideological principles have been reinforced slowly and repeatedly over time. However, what is particularly notable about how this process has occurred is the fact that not only has it reproduced and reinforced the underlying ideological principles, but it has also acted to strengthen them over time. As a result, in the one instance of ‘critical juncture’, during the liberalised planning era of the 1980s, when the existing institutional arrangements were exposed to forces that actively wanted to change them, such was their strength, they were able to pervade. In this sense, not only can we see the strength of the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning, but also its ideological foundations too, and, as a result of this strength, it is arguable that the practice of retail planning has become highly path dependent.

10.4 The Invisible Influences of Retail Planning

The preceding sections in this chapter have considered the pervasiveness of certain historical influences in retail planning in England and, in doing so, have shown evidence that the practice of retail planning has become path dependent. In examining these influences in detail, it has been shown that this path dependence can be understood to result from both the conscious reproduction and reinforcement of existing institutional arrangements by planners, as well as active resistance to change instigated. However, one aspect that has not yet been considered, but which certainly warrants attention, is the question of whether there are more innate forces at play. Of particular interest in this regard, is whether psychological and cognitive influences affect the way decisions are made, and if so, to what extent these can help explain retail planning's tendency towards path dependence. Research in planning has tended to focus on socio-political, geographical and economic factors when considering the influences of planning behaviour, with research into the behavioural psychology of planners decidedly lacking. This is likely because the roots of planning are aligned to architecture and engineering, which means it is often viewed as being rational and objective, a discipline of reason and not emotion (Sandercock, 2004). However, as several authors have noted, to overlook psychological influences in planning, is to overlook a critical factor that likely influences the decision-making of planners (Ferreira, 2013; Sandercock, 2004; Sturzaker and Lord, 2017).

10.4.1 Risk Aversion as an Influence in Retail Planning

In considering the importance of psychological and cognitive influences over decision-making in planning, it is first necessary to examine the wider body of literature that addresses how such forces influence decision-making behaviour in general. Within behavioural economics, which represents the confluence of research on economics and psychology, there are several notable theories regarding the factors that influence decision-making, all fundamentally predicated upon the idea that humans are not as 'rational' as has traditionally been supposed. In the 1950s, the economist Herbert Simon argued that economics needed to consider how actual decisions being taken, differed from predictive modelling, which supposed that human decision making behaviour was rational. He argued that the ability of people to make rational choices was limited by their own 'computational capabilities', as

well as the complexity of the task at hand and the length of time they had to make a decision, a phenomenon he termed ‘bounded rationality’ (Simon, 1955). Simon suggested that in reality, decision making was partly determined by short-hand rules known as ‘heuristics’ and that, as a result, standard normative economic models could not accurately predict real behaviours (Simon, 1955; 1979). Building upon Simon’s assertion, it is possible to argue that cognitive influences may be relevant to understanding certain aspects of planning behaviour because, as was noted above, the dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ retail development arguably exists as such a heuristic. In this case, it is arguable that the pervasiveness of this dichotomy can be partially explained not by any underlying assumption that it is somehow true, but rather than by nothing more than it serving as a simple and readily useful shorthand rule for how development should occur.

Following on from Simon’s work, behavioural economists began to model bounded rationality, which ultimately led to the identification of risk aversion as one of the main psychological influences on decision-making. In 1979, two psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky developed Prospect Theory, which suggested that when making decisions, individuals weighed potential gains and losses against one another in such a way that individuals exhibit “inconsistent preferences, when the same choice is presented in different forms” (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979, p263). The reason for this is that individuals tend to weigh the gains and losses of any decision against a pre-determined reference point, and that in general, individuals are more sensitive to losses against this reference point than they are to gains (Tversky and Kahneman, 1991). This tendency came to be known as ‘loss aversion’ and it soon became apparent that it manifested itself in the behaviours of decision makers in numerous ways, such as with the Endowment Effect, which suggested that people tend to place a greater value on an item they already have (value to sell), than they would place on the same item if they did not already have it (value to buy) (Thaler, 1980). Further research showed that in these instances, the Endowment Effect comes not from an increase in the perceived attractiveness of items owned, but rather from the pain that would come with losing them (Kahneman, Knetsch and Thaler, 1991).

Another example of loss aversion in action is referred to as Status Quo Bias, which holds that in situations when individuals are offered the chance to make a change of some form, they exhibit a bias towards maintaining the existing status quo (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988). In discussing the significance of Status Quo Bias within science, Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988) argue that science, by its very nature, is predisposed towards “old ideas and beliefs”, which results in it forming “barriers of resistance to alternative explanations” (p46). For them, scientists are not objective ‘decoders’ of empirical evidence, rather they have decided preferences regarding scientific beliefs, which “can be seen as a reaction to tensions caused by cognitive dissonance” (p47). In many regards, the similarities between the scientists that Samuelson and Zeckhauser refer to in their research and the planners that form the focus of this research project are clear to see. Both view themselves as being inherently objective, both have established beliefs and both are challenged by competing and conflicting conceptualisations of the world around them, which threaten their view regarding what is right. Accordingly, it could certainly be argued that the adherence to the status quo by planners, such as that evidenced with town-centre-first, reflects an underlying aversion to loss, just as have been postulated by models of behavioural economics such as Prospect Theory.

The growth of research into risk aversion in decision making soon spread into other disciplines, including planning, which has been characterised as being highly risk averse (Davy, 2008; Gunder, 2011; Gunn and Hillier, 2012; Sturzaker and Lord, 2017). Within the literature of planning theory, there are several explanations for why risk aversion has become one of defining characteristics of planning. Gunn and Hillier (2012) suggest that aversion to risk in planning reflects the “culturally constructed norms of predictability, routine and performance targets” that have become a foundation of local planning. Gunder (2011) argues that risk aversion reflects an underlying desire of planners to experience ‘jouissance’, which inherently comes from being viewed as a good planner. This conceptualisation of good planning comes from planning education; where planners obtain the requisite knowledge and learn the required rules that define how any good planner should act (Gunder, 2004; 2011). For Gunder, this translates into planners seeking to replicate past actions that accord with their learned conceptualisation of good planning, even if such actions may not actually constitute the intuitive truth of what good planning actually is. If we

consider the historical evidence presented in the preceding chapters, it is certainly arguable that the pervasiveness of certain ideas or beliefs, such as the adherence to the principles of town-centre-first, could be explained as planners acting in accordance with their own definition of good planning. If Gunder's assertion is true, whether such actions are intuitively correct is irrelevant, what is important is whether planners define their actions to be correct, based upon their own learned perceptions of what good planning is.

It is similarly argued that planners knowingly define 'unobtainable' goals based upon fantastical planning visions, even though the realities of planning action are to simply "maintain the status quo of space in our neo-liberal world" (Gunder, 2014, p13). Evidence from the preceding chapters would certainly seem to support the suggestion that planners repeat past behaviours in a manner which results in the implementation of the "dominant dogmas of 'universal best practice'" (Gunder, 2011, p206). This tendency, it has been argued, is reflective of planning's 'homogenised' nature, which lends itself to effective communication and exchange of 'existing' information, but where 'new' information can struggle to permeate (Holden, 2008). In this regard, the unwillingness of planners to change reflects Gunder's assertion that:

"...the repetitive application of effective habits, and the avoidance of past mistakes, in our planning, or other, practices, tends to stifle creativity and a desire for change" (2011, p206)

Another factor that may contribute to risk aversion in planning is what is termed the Social Amplification of Risk Theory, which postulates that otherwise low-level risks can become magnified in the eyes of individuals, groups or the public at large. Far from being defined objectively and rationally, risk is actually influenced heavily by wider social factors including, information processes, institutional structures, social-group behaviours, and individual responses (Kasperson et al. 1988). This can be seen clearly in instances where local residents and community groups are in opposition to planning applications, as such opposition is often framed from a 'risk' or 'threat' perspective that is shaped subjectively (see for example: Hawkins, 2018; Holden, 2018; Sumner, 2018). However, it can be argued that planners themselves exhibit similar traits and it is easy to see how the organisational structure, operational

practices and social interactions of planning could act to amplify 'risk'. In fact, if we consider retail planning as an example, it is arguable that the planning dichotomy between good and bad retail development is shaped as much by educational best practice, institutional norms and social learning, as it is by any 'objective' evidence. When the preceding considerations are taken together, it is conceivable to suggest that decision-making in retail planning does exhibit evidence of risk-aversion and, it is arguable that such risk-aversion may help to explain the tendency of retail planning towards path dependent behaviour.

As most of the historically pervasive influences in retail planning can be traced back to the very origins of planning, this would suggest that risk aversion is an inherently intrinsic part of planning practice. Yet historical evidence from what is often regarded as the 'golden age' of town planning, during the first twenty or so years after the Second World War, paints a different picture. During this time, grandiose plans that envisioned the wide scale renewal of the urban fabric were common place (Larkham, 1997) and despite the many social, political and technical problems that were encountered, planners maintained a decided confidence that they could rebuild a better Britain (Cherry, 1996). In the context of retail planning, therefore, it is arguable that it was only with the arrival of retail decentralisation and the subsequent emergence of new socio-political ideologies in government, that the decision-making behaviours of planners became increasingly risk averse. Over time, this risk-aversion in decision-making acted to reinforce certain theoretical, conceptual and ideological ideas, which ultimately can be seen to have contributed to retail planning having become path dependent.

10.4.2 Does Fear Influence Decision Making in Planning?

If retail planning can be seen to exhibit evidence of path dependence and, if this path dependence can be partially explained by the increasingly risk-averse behaviours of planners, then the question now becomes, what is it that has caused risk aversion to become a factor in the way decisions are made? One possible explanation, for which there is a substantive body of theoretical evidence, is that emotion serves as an important influence over the manner in which decision-making occurs. Unfortunately, this literature does not extend as far as planning, meaning that emotions remain a poorly understood influence in relation to the behaviours of

planners (Ferreira, 2013). Nonetheless, it has been argued that to overlook the influence of emotions in the decision-making behaviour of planners, is to overlook a critical factor that may help to explain why certain decisions are made, as they are (Ferreira, 2013; Sandercock, 2004; Sturzaker and Lord, 2017).

One emotion that has been suggested as being a potentially significant influence over decision-making in planning is fear (Sturzaker and Lord, 2017). If we take this to be true, it could be argued that during the golden age of town planning, ‘hope’ stood as a more powerful and much needed antithesis to ‘fear’, which resulted in a much less risk-averse decision-making culture. Of course, planners still exhibited risk-averse behaviours, as is a natural tendency of all of us; however, the ubiquity of hope and optimism resulted in an unerring confidence in planning. Unfortunately, such optimism could not be maintained and what occurred over the following decades was the sustained subordination of hope to fear within the culture of professional planning practice. By the 1980s, planning had very much become a political *bête noire* and consequently, as hope was slowly suppressed and ultimately extinguished in planning, the prevalence of risk aversion in decision-making increased.

Finding evidence that supports the idea of hope being suppressed within planning is not hard. As far back as the 1960s, planners were being criticised for their adherence to the principles of order and efficiency (Jacobs, 1961), and in the 1970s numerous critiques of their actions emerged from within the academic community (Castells, 1977; Hall, 1974; Harvey, 1973; Pahl, 1970). In the 1980s, this criticism spread into mainstream politics, as the new neo-liberal doctrine of the Thatcher administration took hold and the government, believing that planners acted as a brake on development (Grant, 1992), embarked upon a programme of reform that sought to make planning more orientated towards market principles (Thornley, 1993). Similarly, under New Labour, the shift from the traditional principles of land-use planning to the more nebulous concept of ‘spatial planning’ obfuscated the reality that spatial planning was in actuality nothing more than a rebranded continuation of existing neoliberal doctrine (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2011). In this sense, ‘spatial planning’ simply acted to continue “the dismantling of the principles upon which urban and environmental planning [had] taken place in England for decades” (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2014, p356). More recently, the shift towards a new

‘citizen-centred’ planning model under the Coalition government has served yet another blow to traditional planning principles, whereby government support for the concept of community-led neighbourhood planning, obscures a more ‘radical’ agenda that seeks to “de-professionalise” planning practice (Lord et al., 2017). Add in the plethora of negative media coverage and opinion pieces (see for example: Clark, 2008; Mount, 2013; Newling, 2009; Rodgers, 2014) and it is not hard to see how hope has all but disappeared from planning practice. Of course, not all of these criticisms are unfair and there is plenty of evidence to show that planners, at times, get things wrong. The problem is that in general, attention from politicians, academics and the media has tended to emphasise planning failure far more than it has emphasised planning success (Lord et al., 2017).

While it is possible to make a compelling case for fear being a significant influence in the way decisions are made in planning, the lack of literature on this issue relating specifically to planning, means that it is necessary to draw upon wider psychological literature, in order to lend support such an assertion. As was noted above, there is extensive research that has looked at the psychology of decision-making, covering a variety of topics including incidental moods (moods unrelated to decision making), integral affect (feelings and emotions related to decision making), regret, and the emotional consequences of decision making (George and Dane, 2016).

One of the most significant areas of psychological research into decision-making relates to the Omission Bias, which holds that individuals tend to view a decision-making action that leads to a negative outcome, as being worse than a decision-making inaction that leads to an equivalent outcome. In other words, doing something that leads to a bad outcome is viewed more negatively than doing nothing, even if doing nothing leads to same net outcome (Ritov and Baron, 1992; Spranca, Minsk and Baron, 1990). It has been suggested that this may reflect the fact that people tend to feel more regret over an action they have taken, because the action they have taken may be viewed as being causal, when an equivalent inaction would not (Ritov and Baron, 1995). Similarly, research has shown that when individuals make a good decision that results in a bad outcome, this is likely to lead to negative emotions becoming associated with the original decision, even if the actual decision taken was ultimately good (Ratner and Herbst, 2005). Given this, it could be argued

that the increasing tendency of planners towards regulatory control and away from pro-active planning reflects the omission bias in action, because planners have been heavily criticised in the past, when decisions they have taken have resulted in negative outcomes. As such, by shifting towards regulatory control, planners have been able to move away from making pro-active decisions, which, based upon the omission bias hypothesis, reduces the negative emotions they experience when things go wrong.

Most early research into the effect of emotions on decision making focused upon how broadly defined ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ emotional states tended to influence behaviour (Lerner and Keltner, 2000). For example, Wright and Bower (1992) showed that happy individuals tend to perceive that positive outcomes will be more likely than negative ones, whereas sad individuals tend to perceive that negative outcomes will be more likely. Interestingly, while happy people tend to be more optimistic in their expectations regarding the likelihood of a good outcome, their actual behaviours tend to be more constrained, meaning they take fewer risks than those in a negative mood (Mittal and Ross Jr., 1998). It has been suggested that this may reflect the fact that when positive individuals actually make decisions, their focus shifts towards the actual likely outcomes (i.e. the gains or losses), rather than the probabilities that these outcomes will occur (Nygren et al., 1996). Other research has given greater thought to the differing impacts of individual emotions that share similar valence (level of ‘goodness’). For example, Raghunathan and Pham (1999) show that anxiety and sadness (which are both negative emotions) actually alter an individual’s state of mind in different ways, such that sadness pushes people towards risk seeking behaviour and anxiety towards risk averse behaviour. Similarly, fear has been repeatedly shown to increase levels of risk aversion as compared to anger (Coget, Haag and Gibson, 2011; Habib et al., 2015; Lerner et al., 2003; Yang et al., 2018).

In considering research that has focussed upon fear specifically, Lerner and Keltner (2000; 2001) have shown that emotions are linked to ‘self-other’ agency (i.e. levels of control and certainty), such that the decision making of fearful individuals is inherently framed by a sense of uncertainty and lack of control. Accordingly, when fearful individuals make decisions, this are often aimed at trying to establish some

certainty and regain some control, resulting in them adopting a risk-averse approach. In considering this idea in relation to retail planning, it could be argued that the growing threat posed by retail decentralisation has resulted in planners, fearful of losing control over the spatial pattern of retail provision, erring towards regulatory control, where the emphasis is very much on seeking to regain control and reduce uncertainty. Much of the wider research surrounding fear and decision-making has focused upon theories of how a fear of the ‘unknown’ can influence behaviour. For example, the Mere-Exposure Effect, also referred to as the familiarity bias, suggests that people have a tendency to favour what they are familiar with in decision making, inherently because they ‘fear’ the unknown (Cao et al., 2011). The Familiarity bias is itself related to both the Status Quo Bias and also the Ambiguity Effect, the latter of which suggests that people tend to have an aversion to taking risks in ambiguous situations, so-much-so that they may knowingly take a guaranteed loss in a ‘known’ situation, as opposed to taking a non-guaranteed loss in an unknown situation (Ellsberg, 1961; Viscussi and Chesson, 1999). In the context of retail planning, it could be argued that the aversion to new forms of retail development, stems as much from “an exaggerated fear of what might happen, rather than an informed view of what actually does happen when such schemes are developed” (Retail Think Tank, 2009, p30). In such instances, the decision to support a failing or suboptimal retail centre is considered preferential because, even though the existing retail provision is not of the required standard, it is a ‘known’ quantity, and therefore preferential to the ‘unknown’ that comes with new retail development.

The importance of emotions as an influence in decision-making is evidently clear to see. Not only is it now universally accepted that decision making is inherently influenced by heuristics, but also that these heuristics can be themselves bound up in the emotional state-of-mind of the decision maker, in a process known as Affect Heuristics. As a result, research that seeks to understand the socio-economic and political contexts of emotions has become a significant area of study (Jarymowicz and Bar-Tal, 2006; LaGrange, Ferraro and Supanic, 1992), as has the broader study of why we perceive risk in the way we do (Slovic, Fischhoff and Lichtenstein, 1982; Wildavsky and Dake, 1990). While the true extent to which affect heuristics actually influence our risk perception is not truly known (Sjoberg, 2000), it is argued that even when taking an analytical approach to decision making (as opposed to an

intuitive one), such heuristics still have an influence, because they form “the neural and psychological substrate of utility” which “enables us to be rational actors in many important situations” (Slovic et al., 2004, p321; Slovic et al., 2005). In this sense, the extent to which a decision taken can ever be considered truly objective is highly questionable.

The research literature reviewed here barely scratches the surface of what is a substantive and varying area of study. However, while such literature can serve as a rich seedbed for developing conceptual ideas regarding how different psychologically bound influences affect decision-making in planning, it is always important to remember that such studies are usually conducted in a laboratory environment, often lacking real world socio-cultural and organisation context. As George and Dane (2016) remark:

“By its very nature, decision making in organizations is a messy, complicated process involving ambiguity, equivocality, sense making, politics, history, and time. Moreover, the consequences of such decision making can be substantial and far reaching. Decisions made in organizations carry the potential to influence an organization’s performance or reputation or the safety and welfare of organizational members and other stakeholders” (p52)

While there has been some limited attempt to seek out real world evidence of various psychological phenomena (DellaVigna, 2009), research outside the laboratory is decidedly lacking. The take from this, therefore, is that while we can safely say that emotions, in all of their various forms, do have a significant impact upon the process of decision-making, any research into this process in planning needs to be context dependent. As such, effective research that seeks to understand the behaviour of planners needs to consider not only how their emotional state of mind (both as individuals and as a collective) affects the decisions they make, but also how these emotions are bound up in the unique contextual circumstances in which decisions are made. In this sense, while it can be said with some confidence that ‘fear’ will have had some form of psychological influence over decision-making in retail planning in the past, it can never be said with complete certainty how this has occurred and to

what extent, because there is no way to know definitively what the emotional state of mind of planners was like, at the time these decisions were made. Nonetheless, it is contended here, that the arguments put forward in the latter part of this chapter do provide a compelling case in favour of the supposition that has ‘fear’ has become an increasingly important influence in the decision making behaviour of planners with regards to retail development.

10.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to build upon the historical analysis presented in the previous chapters, to identify and establish the pervasive strands of historical influence over decision-making in retail planning. In doing so, it has been shown that retail planning exhibits strong evidence of path dependence, in terms of both its theoretical and conceptual foundations, as well as the ideological principles that define its *raison d'être*. In this sense, the continuity of support for town centres and the wider retail hierarchy in retail planning, can be understood to be partially the result of certain pervasive historical influences continually reinforcing and reproducing certain institutional arrangements, processes and beliefs, which act to embed the idea that these remain the best locations for new retail development, within both the collective consciousness of planners and the mechanisms of state planning. In considering possible reasons for why retail planning has become path dependent, it has been shown that there has been an increasing tendency to towards risk-averse behaviour in planning, which, it is proposed, could be reflective of ‘fear’ having become an increasingly significant emotional influence in planning practice. In this regard, it is proposed that in addition to the pervasiveness of certain theoretical, conceptual and ideological principles, path dependence in retail planning reflects the presence of certain deeply rooted and highly influential psychological factors, which fundamentally influence the way decision-making occurs.

11 THE DECLINE OF RETAIL CENTRES: CHALLENGES AND CAUSES

11.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters in this thesis have provided a comprehensive historical analysis of the evolution of retail planning in England and have argued that retail planning exhibits strong evidence of path dependence. In addition, it has also been proposed that the increasingly risk-averse behaviour of planners may be partly attributable to the growing influence of fear, as an emotional state in planning practice. The remainder of this thesis seeks to build upon this, by considering the manner in which decision-making occurs in retail planning today and, as such, seeks to complement the historical context, by establishing the contemporary context in which decision-making occurs. In line with this, the purpose of this chapter and the one that follows is to present the research findings from a series of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted as part of this research project, and which were designed to identify the core influences over decision-making in retail planning today. The chapter begins by providing a brief profile of the case-study area (section 11.2); including an overview of the main urban centres and primary retail destinations, as well as the local authority documentary sources that were consulted as part of the interview phase. The chapter then moves on to examine the core retail-related challenges that are being faced by planners within these areas today (section 11.3), as well as the likely causes and contributing factors (section 11.4). Following

on from this, the viewpoints of local planners will be compared with other local stakeholders and wider sectoral evidence (section 11.5), in order to ascertain the extent to which differing historical and contemporary influences affect the way in which planners contextualise and understand the problems they are facing today.

11.2 Case Study Profile: The Greater Merseyside Region

As was noted in Chapter 3, this research project incorporates elements of both historical and contemporary data collection and analysis, with the contemporary research phase involving both documentary analysis and a series of semi-structured interviews, being conducted within a defined case study area. Various measures were used to identify this case study area, which includes the local authorities of Liverpool, Wirral, Sefton, Knowsley, St. Helens, Halton, Warrington, Cheshire West and Chester and West Lancashire. In order to distinguish this research project's case study area from existing geographical subdivisions, such as Merseyside or the Liverpool City Region, it has been termed the Greater Merseyside Region.

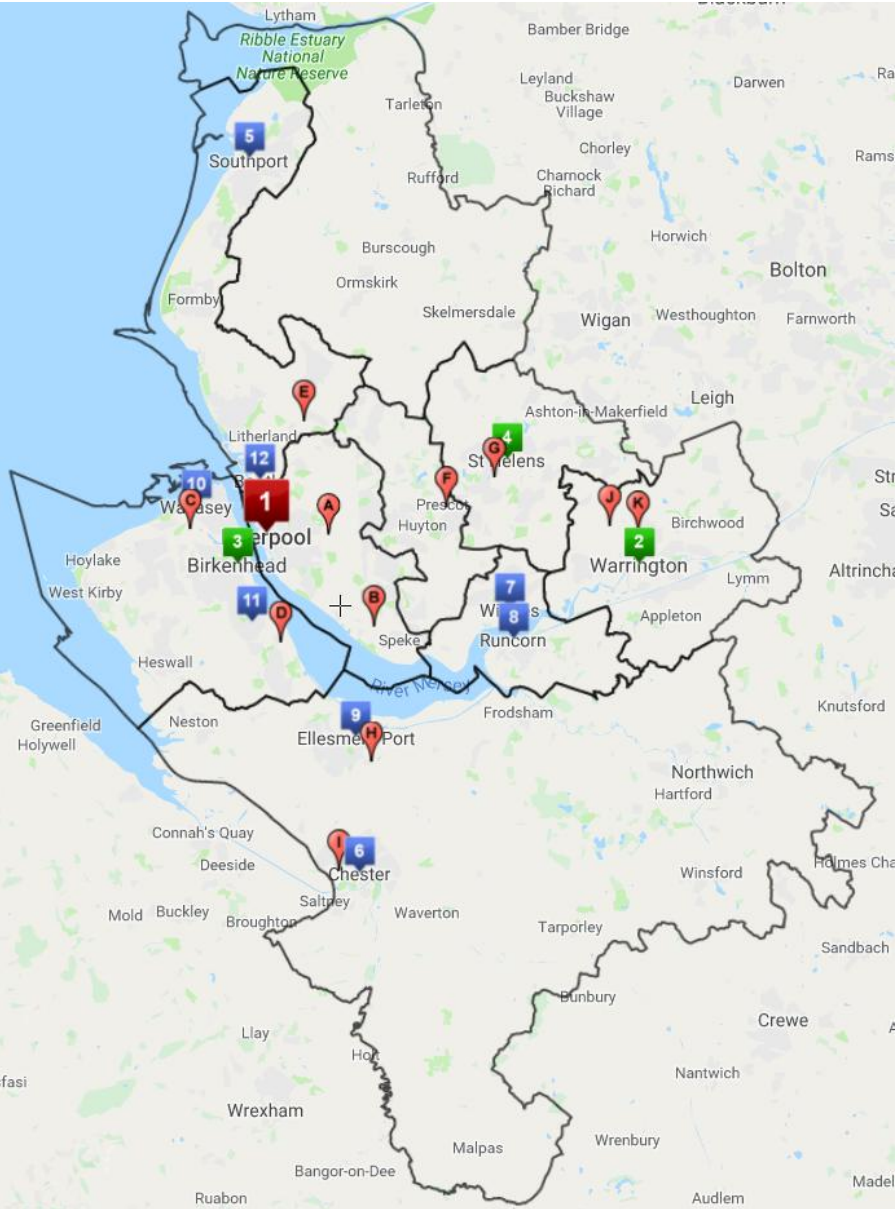
11.2.1 Settlement Pattern and Retail Structure of the Greater Merseyside Region

The Greater Merseyside Region (Figure 1) is located in the North West of England and incorporates the Metropolitan County of Merseyside, as well as surrounding parts of West Cheshire and West Lancashire. Mid-2017 estimates by the Office for National Statistics (ONS)⁸, give a population for the Greater Merseyside Region of just over 2.2 million people, with the majority of these living within the heavily urbanised central belt, which stretches from the Wirral Peninsula in the west to Warrington in the east. Conversely, the northerly and southerly portions of the region are more sparsely populated, with significant amounts of rural and semi-rural land. In terms of metropolitan centres, the City of Liverpool is by far the largest urban area in the region, with a population of over 500,000, followed by the towns of Warrington, Birkenhead and St. Helens. In total, there are 12 towns with a population greater than

⁸ All statistics are based upon mid-2017 estimates by the Office for National Statistics, unless otherwise stated

50,000 in the region. Knowsley and West Lancashire are the only local authorities without a town that has a population greater than 50,000.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the distribution of the local population, the retail hierarchy within the Greater Merseyside Region forms an approximately elliptical shape. Figure 1 shows the major urban centres within the Greater Merseyside Region ordered by population size, as well as the major out-of-centre retail areas. Liverpool City Centre dominates as the highest ordered centre in the region, as well as being ranked sixth nationally (Javelin Group, 2015). This is largely due to the Liverpool ONE shopping complex, which was opened in 2008, although there are several other notable retail locations in the city centre, including Bold Street, the MetQuarter, Cavern Walks, Church Street, Clayton Square and St. Johns Shopping Centre. Outside of Liverpool, the other major urban retail centres are Chester, Warrington and Southport, with Chester performing particularly strongly (ranked 37th nationally), despite its small size (Javelin Group, 2015). According to data from the Local Data Company, both Warrington and Chester are skewed more towards chain multiple retailers, while Southport is skewed more towards independent retailers (LDC, 2013). Interestingly, despite their larger size, both Birkenhead and St. Helens have suffered significant retail decline over recent years and neither is considered a destination of note in retail terms. Similarly, many of the smaller town and larger district centres in the region have come to be dominated by a downmarket retail provision, with both Ellesmere Port and Huyton (Knowsley) ranking in the bottom 10 nationally, based upon market position (Javelin, 2015). In terms of specific retail developments, it is noticeable that many of the older, in-town shopping centres, such as The Pyramids in Birkenhead, The Strand in Bootle and Shopping City in Runcorn, suffer from high vacancy rates and low footfall levels. Instead, the region has several particularly strong out-of-centre shopping parks, most notably Cheshire Oaks Designer Outlet Village (H) and the New Mersey Retail Park (B). Overall, these patterns are illustrative of the significant divergence in the performance levels between different retail centres within the region, which, as was noted in Chapter 2, is broadly reflective of the national picture today.



Primary Urban Centres

<i>Population 500,000+</i>	
(1) Liverpool	(579,256)
<i>Population 100,000+</i>	
(2) Warrington	(172,068)
(3) Birkenhead	(144,756)
(4) St. Helens	(104,641)
<i>Population 50,000+</i>	
(5) Southport	(93,426)
(6) Chester	(87,593)
(7) Widnes	(63,365)
(8) Runcorn	(61,723)
(9) Ellesmere Port	(61,383)
(10) Wallasey	(61,043)
(11) Bebington	(58,055)
(12) Bootle	(51,964)

Major Out-of-Centre Retail Locations

- (A) Liverpool Shopping Park (Liverpool)
- (B) New Mersey Retail Park (Liverpool)
- (C) Junction 1 Retail Park (Wirral)
- (D) Croft Retail and Leisure Park (Wirral)
- (E) Aintree Shopping Park (Sefton)
- (F) Cables Shopping Park (Knowsley)
- (G) Ravenhead Retail Park (St. Helens)
- (H) Cheshire Oaks Designer Outlet Village & Coliseum Retail Park (Cheshire West)
- (I) Greyhound Retail Park (Cheshire West)
- (J) Gemini Retail Park (Warrington)
- (K) Junction Nine Retail Park (Warrington)

FIGURE 1 – MAP SHOWING MAJOR URBAN CENTRES AND PRIMARY OUT-OF-CENTRE RETAIL LOCATIONS WITHIN THE GREATER MERSEYSIDE REGION

11.2.2 Retail Planning Policy within the Greater Merseyside Region

In preparation for the interviews, it was necessary to gain a clearer understanding of locally specific approaches towards retail planning. In order to achieve this it was necessary to review documentary literature, which outlined the retail planning policies of the local authorities within the Greater Merseyside Region. In all instances, this information was contained within the newly emerging local plans; however, due to their differing stages of development, some of these documents were only in draft form. Nevertheless, it was determined that draft local plans would be considered preferential to pre-existing Unitary Development Plans, as many of these dated from the mid-2000s and thus preceded not only the financial crisis, but also the rise of digital shopping. Table 11.1 provides an overview of the documents consulted, including the key strategies relevant to retail planning, as well as the dominant stance of the local authority regarding how they will look to handle applications for retail development.

<u>Local Authority</u>	<u>Document Outlining Retail Planning Policy</u>	<u>Strategic Priority</u>	<u>Key Statement(s) on Retail Planning Policy</u>
Cheshire West and Chester	Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan (Part One) Strategic Policies (Adopted January 2015)	ECON2: Town Centres	<p><i>“To ensure the long-term vitality and viability of the borough's town centres, the Council will apply a town centre first approach to proposals for retail, leisure and other main town centre uses” (p56)</i></p> <p><i>“A sequential test will be applied to planning applications for main town centre uses that are not in an existing centre” (p58)</i></p>
Halton	Halton Core Strategy Local Plan (Adopted April 2013)	CS5: A Network of Centres	<p><i>“It is important to define and protect the retail hierarchy to ensure new development is secured and focused in appropriate locations to enhance and strengthen the Borough's retail offer for the benefit of all” (p51)</i></p> <p><i>“The development of new centres will be expected to consolidate and enhance the network and hierarchy of centres and not harm the vitality and viability of existing centres” (p52)</i></p>
Knowsley	Knowsley Local Plan Core Strategy (Adopted January 2016)	CS6: Town Centres and Retail Strategy	<i>“New retail and other main town centre uses... will be primarily located within existing town centres in accordance with Policy CS6: Town Centres and Retail Strategy. A sequential</i>

			<i>approach to site selection shall be applied with locations in existing town, district and local centres of an appropriate scale being considered first, then edge of centre locations and then only if suitable sites are not available should out of centre sites be considered” (p59)</i>
Liverpool	Liverpool Local Plan (Draft Published September 2016)	6: Liverpool City Centre 9: Shopping Centres and Community Facilities	<i>“The vitality and viability of the centres within the City’s network and hierarchy... will be protected and enhanced in order to provide a sustainable distribution of shops and services within Liverpool to support local communities. These centres will be the preferred locations for retail, office, leisure and cultural/ tourism developments” (p172)</i> <i>“NPPF requires Local Plans to define a network and hierarchy of centres that is resilient to anticipated economic changes. It requires the adoption of a town centre first approach to new investment and the inclusion of policies to support their vitality and viability” (p173)</i>
Sefton	Local Plan for Sefton (Adopted April 2017)	ED2: Retail, Leisure and Other Town Centre Uses	<i>“Retail, leisure and other main town centre uses will be directed towards the Borough’s existing centre... Planning permission will only be granted for development which is appropriate to the role and function of each centre” (p65)</i> <i>“Proposals for all retail, leisure and other town centre uses will be subject to a sequential approach to development” (p65)</i>
St. Helens	St. Helens Local Plan 2018-2033 Preferred Options (Draft Published December 2016)	LPC04: Retail and Town Centres	<i>“Proposals for Main Town Centre uses that are not located in an existing centre will be subject to a sequential approach to development in line with national policy” (p107)</i> <i>“To ensure the vitality and viability of the Borough’s centres is maintained and enhanced, the Council will continue to apply the ‘Town Centre First’ principle when considering proposals for Main Town Centre uses, including retail” (p109)</i>
Warrington	Warrington Local Plan Core Strategy (Adopted July 2014)	PV4: Retail Development within the Town Centre and Primary Shopping Area SN4: Hierarchy of	<i>“The focus of new retail development in the borough is the Primary Shopping Area within Warrington Town Centre... Where retail development is proposed outside of the Primary Shopping Area and is not in accordance with any allocation made within the Local Plan... the applicant will be required to demonstrate that no suitable sites are available in more sequentially</i>

		Centres SN5: New Retail and Leisure Development Within Defined Centres	<i>preferable locations” (p55)</i> <i>“Retail and Leisure uses will be directed towards District, Neighbourhood and Local Centres where the development is of a scale and nature appropriate to the area served by the centre. Proposals will be expected to enhance the vitality, viability and overall attractiveness of the centre” (p74)</i>
West Lancashire	West Lancashire Local Plan 2012-2027 (Adopted October 2013)	IF1: Maintaining Vibrant Town and Local Centres GN5: Sequential Tests	<i>“Retail and other appropriate town centre development will be encouraged with town and local centres, followed by edge of centre locations, in line with national policy. Retail and other main town centre uses will only be considered in out-of-centre locations if a specific local need is proven for the proposed development and there is no suitable site available with a town, village or local centres” (p113)</i>
Wirral	Wirral Core Strategy Local Plan (Draft Published December 2012; Proposed Amendment Published November 2014)	21: Town Centres	<i>“The main objective for Town Centres will be to improve the environment and support investment to achieve a mix of uses, with retail as the principal use, to ensure the centres continue to meet the needs of the communities within the catchments that they serve” (p72)</i> <i>“The Council's priorities are to promote sustainable shopping patterns, focus the provision of shops and other facilities within existing centres to protect and enhance their vitality and viability, including local consumer choice and trade; promote social inclusion and minimise transport emissions” (p81)</i>

FIGURE 2 – TABLE SHOWING RELEVANT LOCAL PLAN DOCUMENTS AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES OUTLINING RETAIL PLANNING POLICY WITHIN THE GREATER MERSEYSIDE REGION

11.3 The Challenge of Declining High Streets

In considering the challenges that local authorities are facing today, it is possible to distinguish two separate, albeit interlinked strands. On the one hand local authorities are dealing with manifest problems that reflect the decline that many retail centres are experiencing, such as empty shops, a decaying urban fabric and an overall retail malaise. On the other hand, they are also struggling to formulate comprehensive and effective strategies to counter the decline they are experiencing, primarily due to a

struggle to attract investment, but also because of a systematic and sustained erosion of planning power, which has left them with limited control over how and where retail development occurs.

When considering town centres and the main retail core, local authorities referred to the visibly evident problems that many retail centres have, particularly in terms of vacant units, an unattractive retail offer and a sub-standard urban fabric. The loss of both large chain retailers and small independents was referred to in relation to the retail offer, with the loss of major high street retail chains being viewed as particularly damaging, as these stores tend to be the main draw for consumers. Several respondents also referred to the growth of betting shops, fast food outlets and charity shops in weaker centres, and while these were not seen as a problem per se, they were seen to be indicative of an overall “retail malaise” that was blighting many centres. In terms of problems associated with a sub-standard urban fabric, it was interesting to note that large in-town shopping centres constructed prior to the 1980s were seen as being the primary issue in this regard. Not only are many of them in a poor condition, with a sub-standard layout and aesthetic design, but also most lack any of the redeeming “charm” of the more traditional linear high street. A frequently cited caveat to criticisms of these centres was that they were often developed as part of wider pedestrianisation schemes, which has meant that today; many centres have poor accessibility and a lack of adequate parking facilities. It should be noted that while the more traditional high street was not as frequently identified when reviewing the urban fabric, several respondents did identify issues that they were now facing in these areas, particularly in relation to their adaptability to the requirements of modern retail, as well as the greater legal protection afforded to historic buildings.

A similar series of issues were identified in relation to district and local centres, with the poor quality layout and design of many centres being cited as the main problem, particularly in relation to the demands of the growing value grocery sector. Larger district centres, particularly those of linear design on arterial routes, were seen to be particularly problematic because of their lack of design flexibility, which meant that it was highly unlikely that they will ever be able to return to scale of provision that they once had. In fact, the picture appears so bleak in some instances, that more than

one respondent suggested it might be necessary to begin the process of “managed decline” in some centres, such that a majority of the current retail space is transferred to alternative uses:

“Smaller centres I think may change a lot. You’ll still end up with localised provision, but some of those units will become more residential and start meeting other needs within the city” (Local Authority Planner)

The picture presented of local centres was more positive, with many respondents suggesting that their smaller size and more localised offer and catchment, meant that they were somewhat sheltered from the much wider trends of change in retailer and consumer behaviour.

Unsurprisingly, for the majority of local authorities, the most significant issue that was identified was the struggle to attract investment, either through retailers opening up new stores, or through property developers investing in new and refurbished retail developments. Several respondents highlighted how this was resulting in some centres becoming stuck in a “spiral of decline”, whereby a lack of investment left these centres unattractive to new retail firms and consumers, and a lack of consumers and retailers acted to deter investment. Several respondents also highlighted the preference that many developers have for mixed-use schemes, which can act to draw retailers away from the retail core. What was noticeable in the discussion surrounding the challenge of attracting investment was that even when investment is forthcoming, trying to get it where it was needed could be problematic, with developers and retailers frequently expressing a willingness to invest, but only on the condition that they can develop, exactly how and where they want:

“...someone once referred to it as the Goldilocks approach, whereby developers simply say we can’t go in that unit because it’s too big, it’s too small, it’s too expensive” (Local Authority Planner)

In many cases, this private-sector stance can be understood in relation to the changing dynamics of the retail sector, which today places far greater pressure upon retailers to make sure that any physical stores they have are optimally located. Interestingly, there appeared to be little acknowledgment from local authorities that

changing retailer behaviour was, in-and-of-itself, an issue, with the emphasis tending to be placed upon such retailer actions being reflective of the underlying “unattractiveness” of centres instead.

It was as part of the discussion surrounding investment that many local authorities referred to what they saw as the systemic and sustained erosion of planning power. Several respondents expressed their belief that the *National Planning Policy Framework* had tipped the scale into the favour of the private sector and that it was now extremely difficult to control the scale, format and location of new retail developments. The broad consensus seemed to be that while planning policy, as it was, was far from perfect, it at least afforded some power to local authorities, with both the needs test and the ability to easily disaggregate development being cited as major losses:

“I’d say the big change was when they got rid of the needs test... I know they said it was a bit of a crude test, but actually, it was probably the only powerful tool you had. If you want to promote a town centre first strategy, you’ve lost the ability. As it stands, sequentially, the impact tests are too weak” (Local Authority Planner)

Several respondents also drew attention to the relatively recent ruling, commonly referred to as the ‘Dundee decision’, which was seen to have further pushed the impetus towards commercial interests in planning appeals. The ‘Dundee decision’ refers to the United Kingdom Supreme Court case of *Tesco Stores Limited (Appellants) v Dundee City Council (Respondents)*. The case involved a legal challenge by Tesco against a decision taken by Dundee City Council, to grant planning permission to Asda, for a new supermarket close to an existing Tesco store. While the case found in favour of Dundee Council and rejected the appeal put forward by Tesco, the case was noticeable for some of the conclusions that were put forward by the judges, most noticeably that the interpretation of planning policy was a matter of law and not judgement:

“The development plan is a carefully drafted and considered statement of policy, published in order to inform the public of the approach which will be followed by planning authorities in decision-making unless there is

good reason to depart from it. It is intended to guide the behaviour of developers and planning authorities. As in other areas of administrative law, the policies which it sets out are designed to secure consistency and direction in the exercise of discretionary powers, while allowing a measure of flexibility to be retained. Those considerations point away from the view that the meaning of the plan is in principle a matter which each planning authority is entitled to determine from time to time as it pleases, within the limits of rationality. On the contrary, these considerations suggest that in principle, in this area of public administration as in others..., policy statements should be interpreted objectively in accordance with the language used, read as always in its proper context” (Tesco Stores Limited vs. Dundee City Council [2012] UKSC 13, para 18)

The judges also noted that the issue of site suitability, as specified in planning policy and as used in planning decisions, has to take account of the realistic commercial requirements of retailers and developers:

“Here too the context indicates that the issue of suitability is directed to the developer’s proposals, not some alternative scheme which might be suggested by the planning authority. I do not think that this is in the least surprising, as developments of this kind are generated by the developer’s assessment of the market that he seeks to serve. If they do not meet the sequential approach criteria, bearing in mind the need for flexibility and realism to which Lord Reed refers in para 28, above, they will be rejected. But these criteria are designed for use in the real world in which developers wish to operate, not some artificial world in which they have no interest doing so” (Tesco Stores Limited vs. Dundee City Council [2012] UKSC 13, para 38)

The critically of these statements and the wider judges’ conclusions, was the effective establishment of a ‘case-law’ precedent. Planning proposals have since been able to use the case’s findings to support their position, by negating the ability of local planning authorities to change their interpretation of policy (in effect

requiring the legal definition of the terminology used in local planning policy to remain constant for every application) and by also enabling developers and retailers to argue that sequentially alternative suitable sites do not meet their commercial requirements in regard of their original planning proposal. As a result, many local authorities expressed their belief that being able to make effective decisions in regard of new retail development has become even harder than it was before:

“That case is referenced in nearly every single planning application that comes in for retail use; it’s a developer’s dream” (Local Authority Planner)

11.4 The Causes of Decline in Retail Centres

Discussion surrounding the likely causes of decline in retail centres provided an interesting insight into the mindset of planners regarding the contemporary factors that threaten the vitality and viability of retail environments and town centres. It was possible to discern two different, albeit overlapping, classifications of cause: internal weaknesses and external pressures. The overall picture painted by respondents suggested that changes in retailer and consumer behaviours today were being exacerbated by local structural and economic issues, with the result being that there is considerable variation in the performance levels of different centres, as well as their ability to adapt and change in line with the evolving retail sector. Interestingly, while recent economic issues were seen to have had an impact, many of the underlying causes were viewed as being long term structural problems.

11.4.1 The Changing Dynamics of Retailer Demand

When considering the challenge of attracting investment, local authorities were unanimous in their belief that both retailers and developers have become more risk averse and tend to take a more discerning approach when choosing where to invest. As a result, there is greater competition between retail centres for what has become an increasingly limited pool of investment, which is resulting in a significant divergence between the best and worst performing locations:

“I say you’re either in the position that you’re a lucky local authority, that you’ve got a strong centre with critical mass, that the retailers are

prepared to continue investing, or you're in a lower order centre where the retailers patently aren't prepared to invest" (Local Authority Planner)

In expanding upon this, several respondents referenced the fact that there is evidence of fragmentation in the behaviour of firms in different sectors of the market. On the one hand, traditional and more established mid-market and high-end retailers are consolidating their portfolios and only maintaining a presence in the "best locations". On the other hand, the emerging value sector is exhibiting strong growth across multiple locations, with clear evidence of them both exploiting gaps in the market (i.e. opening in locations where established retailers have left) and also by taking market share from competing retailers (i.e. opening in locations where established retailers maintain a presence). What is notable about this, is how this fragmentary behaviour is altering the way different retail centres are perceived by consumers, in part because of the generally held assumption that a large presence of "downmarket" value occupiers is indicative of centre's inability to attract better retailers. Interestingly, it was pointed out by more than one respondent that in some cases an otherwise buoyant and well-occupied centre could be perceived somewhat negatively because of their bias towards certain retail subsectors:

"It's good that the units are there and they are obviously a popular store, they're one of the quickest growing stores, so there is obviously a market for them, but the problem that we have is that we are sort of perpetuating the image of the borough as being lower market" (Local Authority Planner)

Whatever the case, it is certainly clear that these types of retailers remain highly attractive to local authorities because of their far greater willingness to "fit into" existing developments, particularly given that many do not have a digital presence.

The fragmentation of retailer behaviour was something that was noted by local retail development owners as well, especially in relation to the strong performance of both value and quality retailers, which seems to be occurring at the expense of mid-market firms:

“People at the value end of the spectrum... people who are at the absolute high quality end of the spectrum have done well, but if you’re in the middle, if you’re a bit in-between, those are the people who appear to have struggled” (Retail Development Owner)

It was noted, however, that this does not necessarily reflect a clear-cut case of certain consumers preferring one sector to the other, but rather illustrates that consumer behaviour is becoming increasingly disparate. Another example of fragmentary behaviour that was identified by development owners is the varying demand for retail space in different sized centres, primarily based on location. In this sense, large, well-located retail developments are seeing increases in demand as retailers seek to establish a firm presence in strong locations; while smaller, locally convenient centres, such as well-located suburban retail parks are also experiencing significant growth on the back of click-and-collect retailing. Conversely, mid-sized town centres and oversized district centres, particularly if poorly located, are suffering as retailers increasingly shift their focus elsewhere. This trend was also identified by local authorities; however, it was noticeable that there was some divergence between the two groups when it came to determining the underlying causes. For local authorities there was a firm belief that, as consumers become more discerning, the significant catchment overlap between retail centres is meaning that smaller and mid-sized town centres are suffering, as consumers are choosing to shop at larger, more attractive locations. Retail developers on the other hand, while still acknowledging the significant influence that changing ‘spatial’ behaviours are having, tend to emphasise the greater significance of changing ‘structural’ behaviours. Thus, for developers, there is a belief that the polarisation of performance by centre location and size can be attributed to the fact that many retailers are adapting their organisational structures and logistical models, to take advantage of digital consumerism:

“More and more retailers are challenged with the logistics and costs of online; certainly remote delivery and we’re seeing more and more retailers trying to incentivise collection through store” (Retail Development Owner)

As a result, retailers tend to be attracted to well designed, easily accessible centres, with a wide variety of different sized retail units, particularly if those centres show that they are embracing digital change and see it as an opportunity rather than a threat.

When considering the nature of retail demand more generally, most local authorities noted that the preference of retail firms for out-of-centre locations remained unchanged. One respondent wondered whether this was being exacerbated in the current economic climate due to the inherent expectation that any in-town development be of a “higher build quality than an out-of-town one”, which means that many developers and retailers see out-of-centre developments as preferable, due to lower associated costs. A similar view was expressed by retail development owners, who suggested that town centre schemes tend to be more challenging, because there are more considerations that need to be factored into the development process:

“Town centre schemes, by their very nature and their complexity, always take longer to come to fruition... they’re the hub of a lot of communities and so there is always some form of local politics at play” (Retail Development Owner)

While the preference for out-of-centre development remains strong, local authorities are seeing evidence of the opposite trend occurring within the grocery sector, with a drop off in demand for larger, traditional, stand-alone superstores and increasing interest in smaller units, often centred within strong town and district centres. At the same time, several respondents noted that certain sectors that had once been a mainstay of smaller district and local centres, such as hairdressers, barbers and nail salons, are increasingly expanding into town centre locations, as firms seek to differentiate their offer. This again points an element of fragmentation in the behaviours of retail firms, between those who identify a viable future within town centres and those who do not.

At a wider socio-economic level, several local authorities suggested that the high levels of deprivation within their boundaries had the effect of dissuading investment in retail, because of the lower levels of spending power from local consumers. This

was a sentiment echoed by local retail development owners, who also suggested that many small and mid-sized towns are negatively impacted by the fact that they tend to have small town-centre residential populations. In considering why this may be the case, one respondent suggested that many mid-sized and smaller towns have suffered decades of economic decline due to the loss of in-town industry and manufacturing. As a result, these places have suffered from a sharp drop in the working population of the town centre and its periphery, and subsequent to this, a loss of residential population, as people have left in search of work:

“I’d describe [the town] as being like a donut. Over the last 30 years, there’s been very little investment in the town centre, it’s gone instead to the edge, so today you have these huge warehouse parks and retail developments on the edge and loads of derelict land in the centre”

(Representative of Local Economic Investment Board)

The net result is that these places have come to be viewed in a negative light by both investors and retailers, the latter of whom are likely to be deterred by the low sales potential of areas with low working or residential populations.

These considerations formed part of a wider view, held by both local authorities and retail development owners, that the perception of a place more broadly, especially when influenced by stereotypes and media characterisations, can fundamentally alter the flow of investment, and that this is something that is very hard to counter. The concern expressed was that over time this negative investor perception can become entrenched, effectively becoming engrained in the DNA of the area. Notably, the issue of perception can be seen to have a huge influence on consumers as well. Several local authorities noted the willingness of more mobile consumers to travel to neighbouring town centres when they shop, both due to a negative perception of their nearest centre, but also due a more positive view of the offer elsewhere. In considering why this may be so, one development owner suggested that this may be attributable to the greater time-pressure that people are under today, which means consumers don’t want to risk their shopping trip being “wasted” and so are willing to travel further afield, in order to guarantee that they’ll get what they want.

11.4.2 Changing Consumer Demand and the Desire for a ‘Destination Experience’

One of the biggest factors affecting the performance of retail centres is the changing expectations of consumers regarding the retail experience. Most local authorities acknowledged that shopping is becoming more than just an economic activity. On this issue, age is seen to be a major factor, with younger people and families viewed as being more likely to engage with non-retail activities during a shopping trip, such as visiting restaurants, cinemas or bowling alleys. Accordingly, local authorities are seeing an increase in demand for the development of non-retail leisure amenities, within or adjacent to retail centres, with the general consensus being that town centres that fail to provide a compelling and wide ranging offer will suffer:

“If existing retail centres are to survive, they need to diversify, because there is only so much potential for retail expenditure and you need to try and encourage other complementary uses” (Local Authority Planner)

Interestingly, despite acknowledging the impact that changing consumer behaviours are having on retail centres, it was noticeable that local authorities did not place anywhere near as much emphasis on this being the root cause of decline, as compared to the private sector. For many local retail development owners there is a clear belief that changes in consumer behaviour are the key factor in the decline of retail centres today:

“I think this is all driven by consumers, all driven by peoples’ habits and, as much as online is a big factor... online is a reaction to people wanting to have more value for time” (Retail Development Owner)

While both groups agreed that retail firms have become more discerning in regard of where they maintain a physical presence, it was noticeable that only the development owners really considered it important to understand retailer actions in those places where the opposite was true. For them, it was important to acknowledge that while many retail firms are closing their poorer performing stores, these same firms are also investing heavily in and expanding their biggest and best performing stores:

“Strong locations are... the places where the really well performing brands want to be, where they can maximise their impact” (Retail Development Owner)

What is particularly notable about this strategy, as one respondent pointed out, is how it reflects the way in which the management of store portfolios has come to be intrinsically intertwined with the practice of brand management. In practice, this means that having big, new, shiny stores in prime locations, portrays a certain message about a retailer, just as having small, sub-standard and aged stores does too. The importance of brand management is also evident in the significant growth of product manufacturers directly engaging with consumers through their own branded stores, as this can be seen to reflect the fact that manufacturers want to be able to better control how their products are portrayed.

In considering how these actions could be understood in relation to changing consumer behaviours, several local retail development owners talked about how there was a clear dynamic interplay of different influences at work, with the traditional factors that entice shoppers, such as quality, value, choice and convenience, combining with consumers’ socio-economic, cultural and personnel backgrounds to fundamentally influence their behaviour. Thus, far from there being just a small number of distinct consumer groups; today there exist a plethora of overlapping consumer identities that simultaneously exhibit both points of strong similarity and difference. In order for retailers to remain attractive in such a dynamic environment, it is critical that their brand speaks to some of the commonalities that exist in such varying identities, foremost among which is the growing demand for “shopping to be an experience”.

11.4.3 The Decay of Retail Centres: Old, Ugly and No Longer Fit-for-Purpose

In considering the generally poor state of the urban environment in many retail centres, most local authorities pointed out that there has been a sustained lack of investment in the urban fabric, which has left many centres with significant evidence of decay. In many instances, this issue can be attributed to the fact that many of these centres are no longer publically owned; a legacy effect, as one respondent suggested, of programmes that saw the sale of publically owned land and property during the

1980s and 1990s. As these properties are owned by individuals and groups that often have no intrinsic ties to the local area, and are interested in neither investing in, nor selling them, it follows that physical decay is to be expected. Several local authorities suggested that many owners have adopted a strategy of doing nothing, simply seeking to maintain the status quo, as they “bide their time” and wait for the development value of the land to increase:

“Most of them, they don’t have any reason to change what they’re doing. I mean if they’ve got a tenant, if they’re not losing money, there’s no incentive to change” (Local Authority Planner)

A side effect of such a strategy is the proliferation of charity shops in many centres, which, as one respondent suggested, provide an easy stopgap fill that saves property owners money. A similar problem can be seen to plague many older, linear high streets, where the premises often belong to a multitude of different property owners. As these owners may have different objectives and ideas for future direction of these premises, there is often little in the way of coordinated investment programmes and the net result is the slow and creeping decay of the urban fabric.

While lack of investment is certainly a major contributor to the unattractiveness of many retail centres, it is by no means the only one. The age of many retail developments is also a significant problem, because, as many centres were developed well over thirty years ago, they often have a design and layout that is no longer appropriate for the needs of consumers and retailers today. Many older shopping centres are plagued by accessibility issues, substandard transport infrastructure and inadequate parking. The view of local authorities in this regard is mirrored by local retail development owners, who go on to suggest that increased vacancy rates in some centres may actually be more attributable to the unsuitability of available units, rather than lack of demand. In expanding upon this, several respondents suggested that as retailers today are increasingly selective regarding what form of retail unit they require (e.g. size, shape, accessibility etc), if such units are not available, they are more likely to look elsewhere rather than adapting to fit into what is available:

“The main issue is that sequentially, retailers now, because of various appeals decisions, only have to look for sites that meet their needs... if

sites can't accommodate exactly what they're looking to bring forward, then any sites that there are, are dismissed" (Local Authority Planner)

When considering age related issues in town centres, it is fair to say that most local authorities tended to view the purpose-built shopping centres dating from the 1960s and 1970s as being particularly problematic, although shopping centres constructed as late as the 1990s could also be seen to exhibit many of the same deficiencies. Interestingly, whereas local authorities tended to focus explicitly upon the inherent internal weaknesses of such centres (e.g. layout, accessibility), local retail development owners were more likely to contextualise such issues against the wider external pressures within retailing today. For example, more than one development owner suggested that as many older shopping centres were of an enclosed design with limited points of entry and exit, these centres had become "isolated" from the wider town centre and were unattractive to consumers looking for a broad ranging shopping experience. By comparison, modern shopping centres tend to have a more open design and incorporate complementary non-retail leisure amenities. Notably, these centres tend to lack clearly defined entry and exit points, meaning that they merge far more effectively into the wider town centre and actively encourage consumers to experience them as part of the wider town centre offer. While these issues of accessibility were noted by planners, who agreed with developers that contemporary shopping centre design tended to be far more effective in integrating retail with surrounding non-retail activities, it was suggested that such design principles were only likely to be implemented as part of a large-scale overhaul of the urban fabric. As a result, while schemes such as Liverpool ONE had been able to bring about such changes, for most town centres the costs were just too prohibitive:

"The owners are making the best of what they've got. Ideally it would be nice to potentially bulldoze all or part of it and put something more practical and attractive there, but the cost to take that down would be horrendous, not to mention the time and disruption" (Local Authority Planner)

When it came to the outlook for retail centres blighted by these kinds of issues, it was apparent that both local authorities and development owners agreed that some retail

centres have fallen into a perpetual “state of limbo”, with no realistic prospect of improvement, but never reaching a point of completely failing. The problem is, given the size and scale of many of these shopping centres, anything other than minor remedial action is likely to be prohibitive in today’s economic and retail climate, meaning that it is likely that many will continue to blight town centres for years to come:

“[They have] come now, after 40, 50 years to the end of their lifetime really... they need an awful lot of investment with rewiring, roofing, heating... they need new windows... new heating systems, they need everything; but why would you put all that investment to refurbish a property... where there is no end use, so these properties are being left and the landlords know well, that they’re just waiting for the tide to turn, but it’s not turning” (Representative of Local Economic Investment Board)

11.4.4 The Loss of Planning Power and the Inability to Control Development

The last major factor that was identified by local authorities when discussing the causes of decline in retail centres was the impact of budget cuts within planning departments, many of which are operating today with a fraction of the staff that they had 20 or 30 years ago. The result of such cuts is that those planning practitioners that remain are increasingly overstretched and, as a result, more and more key planning decisions are being made by people outside of planning departments. Several respondents referenced the use of external retail consultants as an example of this, and while there was no suggestion that their actions are in any way improper or incorrect, there is a concern at the increasing loss of centralised control that planning authorities have over the decision making process. Notably, this view forms part of a wider concern that many respondents have regarding the erosion of planning power and the commonly held belief that the private sector is becoming increasingly free to develop retail spaces wherever and however they like. Many local authorities are particularly scathing about the government on this issue, feeling that they are being somewhat disingenuous in their approach, simultaneously “championing a localism agenda” and all the while “weakening planning authorities” through reform:

“National retail policy has been diluted... every time there’s been a revision of it; it’s been diluted further and further and further” (Local Authority Planner)

Interestingly, several local authorities suggested that while the explicit rhetoric of government policy was to put town-centres-first, the government’s pro-development, pro-private sector stance meant that for planners, this was becoming an increasingly difficult position to enforce:

“Town centres first is what the government says, but in practice it’s becoming increasingly difficult to do this, because the government aren’t interested, they don’t support us” (Local Authority Planner)

While the consensus of local authorities was that blame lies mostly with the government, there was acceptance that the actions of planners have not helped. For example, several respondents cited the proliferation of high-street chains on retail parks today, which was considered a “legacy” of planning decisions made during the 1980s and 1990s, and the issue of the planning permissions that were granted. At the time, it was never intended, nor was it expected, that traditional high street retailers would seek to open stores on retail parks; however, changing retailer and consumer behaviours have meant that over the last 20 years there has been a vast increase in the number of high street chains located on retail parks. As many of these locations are today seeking to expand and improve their leisure offer, the result is that many larger retail parks now have a consumer offer that is not only comparable to, but in many instances better than nearby town centres. While many would argue that the national planning culture at the time was more in favour of out-of-centre development, there was recognition that some of the issues being faced today are in part a result of the “blasé” planning approach in local authorities that existed at that time:

“...back then... I don’t think planners thought too much about the future. They just saw these opportunities to get investment, to redevelop derelict sites” (Representative of Economic Investment Board)

Even today, planners continue to make decisions that when viewed in hindsight could be considered as being contributory factors to retail decline. One respondent suggested that planners often still do not fully consider the longer-term implications of decisions they take, citing the example of retail developments that have been allowed to grow to a significant size, because their expansion came through small incremental increases in size:

“What you find is say [X] will come in with 2000sq/m and then another year there’ll be another 2000sq/m and nobody really looks at the impacts over time” (Local Authority Planner)

However, as with other instances where local authorities are seemingly willing to absorb some blame for the issues they are facing today, this is often contextualised against a national planning culture that they feel does not afford them sufficient power to adequately control development in the way they would like.

11.5 The Public vs. Private Position: Opposite Sides of the Same Coin

The responses received from both public and private sector respondents provided an interesting insight into the ongoing decline of retail centres, as well as the causes that are seen to be driving this process. In general, the responses were largely consistent with the wider evidence regarding the decline of retail environments, although, it is interesting to note that, there is some evidence that local authorities and local retail development owners are interpreting the decline of retail centres in slightly different ways. For example, from the local authority perspective, the primary issue being faced is the struggle to attract investment in what has become an increasingly competitive environment, which is exacerbated by underlying weaknesses in many retail centres, such as poor layout and design, physical decay and poor location. By comparison, private sector respondents tend to emphasise the challenges posed, as both retailer and consumer expectations are changing in the new digital retailing era. These slight differences in view can potentially be explained by the differing interactions that these two groups tend to have with retail environments. Planners will be actively managing and maintaining a large number of sites within a relatively limited area, all of which will be of varying size and scale, whereas, private developers will more likely be managing only one or two sites within the study area,

most of which will be larger in scale. Given this, it follows that planners will primarily base their responses upon the dominant trends which exist across multiple sites in the local area, whereas property owners will primarily base their responses upon their experiences at one or more specific sites within the local area, supplemented by ‘wider’ sectoral evidence from across the country.

The slightly differing stances taken by the public and private sectors can also be seen to reflect a difference in the underlying economic influences that essentially drive public sector (supply-side) and private sector (demand-side) actions. The planning position places the emphasis for decline on a failure of supply; a failure to provide attractive, safe and well-designed retail centres, which are appealing to both retailers and consumers. This can be seen to reflect the planning view that the geographical provision of retail is essentially a ‘public service’ and should therefore not be determined solely by market demand. Conversely, the private sector view tends to suggest that retail decline is a manifestation of a failure to respond to changing patterns of consumer and retailer demand, as these groups adapt and change their behaviours in the digital era. While both sides appear to exhibit different interpretations of the causes of retail decline, it is more likely that they both understand and recognise exactly the same processes of change, but are simply articulating and framing them from the perspective and viewpoint that most accurately aligns with their own interaction with retail. In this sense, it could be argued that this points to continuing path dependence in retail planning, because there seems to be either an unwillingness or inability of planners to change their view. Of course, this difference in articulation may simply reflect that these two parties have fundamentally different relationships with the wider retail sector and urban environments; however, it is equally likely that it reflects that retailers and planners have fundamentally different views regarding to geographical provision of retail in society today and the form that this should be expected to take.

11.6 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to present the first half of a set of research findings, from a series of semi-structured interviews, which were designed to identify the core influences over decision-making in retail planning today. In doing so, it has been shown that the key challenges facing local planning authorities in regard of

retail environments can be broadly split into two strands. On the one hand, local authorities are dealing with manifest problems that reflect the decline of retail centres, while on the other hand they are struggling to formulate comprehensive and effective strategies to counter this decline. In considering the likely causes of these issues, several factors have been identified, including the changing dynamics of retailer and consumer demand, the physical decay of retail environments and the loss of planning power and the means to control development. It has subsequently been shown that while the general perception of contemporary retail decline by planners accords with other local stakeholders and wider sectoral evidence, there is some evidence to suggest that these problems are still being contextualised by an historical understanding of the expected form and function of retail environments. In this sense, it is arguable that retail planning continues to exhibit evidence of path dependence in the way it operates today.

12 THE DECLINE OF RETAIL CENTRES: THE RESPONSE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES

12.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter has presented the first half of a set of research findings from a series of semi-structured interviews, which were designed to identify the core influences over decision-making in retail planning today. The purpose of this chapter is to continue this endeavour, by presenting the second half of these findings. The chapter begins by considering how local authorities are seeking to respond to the challenges they are facing in regard of retail environments today, focussing particularly on the extent to which contemporary planning strategies can be seen as a direct response to contemporary issues (section 12.2). The chapter will then move on to consider how the strategic position of local authorities compares with other local stakeholders and wider sectoral evidence (section 12.3), in order to ascertain the extent to which differing historical and contemporary influences can be seen to affect the way that planners are strategising for contemporary changes in retail.

12.2 Meet the New Strategy, Same as the Old Strategy

In order to analyse effectively the content and focus of local authority retail strategies, it is first necessary to consider what role these play within planning and the different forms that they can take. In simple terms, retail-planning strategies outline the approach that local authorities will take when dealing with the management and development of retail spaces, including establishing the location

and scale of retail provision. In general, retail strategy can be seen to operate at two different levels, with a longer-term and wide-ranging economic strategy for the region forming part of the local plan, which is in turn supplemented by series of more specific strategic plans for retail. The retail strategy component of the local plan tends to be heavily influenced by government policy and integrates the management of retail provision into wider economic objectives of the local authority. Locally defined retail strategies, on the other hand, tend to address pressing issues that exist within specific locations, offering practical approaches on how they can be resolved, often within the framework of a wider regeneration initiative. While broad retail strategies within the local plan will be established across the entirety of the local authority, more localised development strategies tend to be focussed only on those areas where there is clear evidence of retail decline or evidence of retail demand not being met.

In general, retail-planning strategies tend to be formulaic in nature, with most strategies being largely informed by empirical evidence. Whereas the locations of retail centres tend to remain unchanged over time, the scale of provision, particularly in terms of overall floor-space, tends to fluctuate and change regularly. For this reason, empirically based retail studies tend to provide one of the key sources of data that informs the formulation of retail planning strategy, both in terms of determining retail health and in determining where change in retail provision may be necessary. Most retail studies tend to consider straightforward measures, such as market penetration rates or retail headroom and most studies are repeated every few years providing a longitudinal dataset. However, these studies are not without limitations, including that the data they provide becomes outdated very quickly and the fact that retail studies tell us nothing about wider societal changes that can fundamentally affect retail provision and need. As one respondent pointed out, while traditional retail metrics may show clearly changes in quantitative need, they tell local authorities nothing about the changes in qualitative need:

“[Retail studies] are usually repeated every 3 years or so, so the data we have is pretty up-to-date... Obviously, it’s never going to be perfect. I suppose we don’t have all the information, like what shops are popular and that, but it’s what we’ve got” (Local Authority Planner)

The strategic responses of local authorities to the challenges they are facing in retail centres today are considerably wide ranging, and address a multitude of different issues evident in both town centres and the wider retail environment. Despite this, it is apparent that there are strong elements of commonality between differing strategic approaches and while the overarching objectives may vary from place to place, the manner in which local authorities seek to achieve their aims remains remarkably consistent. Broadly speaking there are four key strands which appear to make-up the majority of contemporary planning strategy in regards to retail: (1) the preservation and protection of the retail hierarchy, (2) continued support for retail as a core component of the town centre offer (3) an emphasis on increasing complementary non-retail leisure uses within retail centres and (4) a renewed focus upon community engagement.

12.2.1 Preserving and Protecting the Retail Hierarchy

In considering the nature of retail planning strategies today, all local authorities were unequivocal that the core objective of effective strategy is to preserve and protect the town centre and the retail hierarchy, ostensibly with the aim of making sure that all local residents have access to a minimum level of adequate retail provision. It should be noted that planning guidance within the *National Planning Policy Framework* does require local authorities to define a network and hierarchy of centres for their local area; however, it is certainly clear from speaking to local planners that the centrality of these principles within local retail strategy is as much a reflection of their own position, as it is a reflection upon the requirements of the government. In fact, in many instances, local authorities establish a clear link between preserving and protecting the retail hierarchy and making sure that urban environments are both sustainable and socially inclusive:

“The Council's priorities are to promote sustainable shopping patterns, focus the provision of shops and other facilities within existing centres to protect and enhance their vitality and viability, including local consumer choice and trade; promote social inclusion and minimise transport emissions” (Wirral Council, 2012, p81)

The stance of local authorities towards preserving the existing hierarchy forms part of a wider strategic emphasis aimed at guiding as much new retail development as possible into town centres. Local authorities continue to view town centres as the most easily and widely accessible locations within urban areas and despite growing evidence to suggest fewer consumers rely on them as they have done in the past, the principle of putting ‘town-centres-first’ remains as strong as ever:

“To ensure the long-term vitality and viability of the borough's town centres, the Council will apply a town centre first approach to proposals for retail, leisure and other main town centre uses” (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2015, p56)

While the primary reason given for protecting the existing retail hierarchy was the need to maintain access to key retail services for all local residents, it was suggested by several respondents that other factors are considered. For example, several respondents referred to the practical benefits of having a clearly defined hierarchy, especially in terms of making it easier to enforce “standardised” planning principles. These include, but are not limited to, being able to determine appropriate locations for new retail development, making sure the scale of such developments can be easily “moderated”, and being able to control the form and function of different centres, so that local residents have access to important local services. It was also suggested by one respondent that protecting the hierarchy of centres plays an important role in preserving local identity, especially in the case of smaller towns located on the periphery of big cities:

“If you don’t support your town centres, then how do these places exist. They just become residential suburbs of a much larger area” (Local Authority Planner)

In considering how they could protect the existing retail hierarchy, all respondents referred to the importance of both the sequential test and impact assessment, when it came to assessing proposals for new retail development. For many respondents, these tools were vital because they felt that, if left unchecked, retail development outside of existing retail centres has the potential to cause undue damage:

“Public consultation has shown ongoing concern about the impact of out-of-centre development on existing centres... Individually and cumulatively, new local shops outside existing centres, particularly if concentrated within the catchment area of a Town, District or Local Centre, could potentially have a significantly adverse impact on the top-up function and vitality and viability of the relevant centre” (Wirral Council, 2012, p79)

While the overall tone of local authority retail strategies tended to be quite restrictive, there was an acknowledgement by several respondents that the popularity of out-of-centre retail sites meant that it was not always possible to overlook them. More than one respondent suggested that if a retail park were appropriately located adjacent to an existing centre, then they would give it serious consideration, if it could be shown that it would be effectively linked into the adjacent centre.

The willingness to incorporate non-hierarchical retail developments into the existing retail hierarchy represents one area of contention, whereby the underlying justification for the hierarchy of centres seems to sit at odds with what is evidently the best strategic approach. While there remains unwavering support for the principles that underpin the hierarchy of centres, there was some evidence to suggest that the ultimate form such hierarchies should take, tends to be less clear-cut, reflecting perhaps the challenge posed as planners grapple with the impacts of changing consumer and retailer behaviour. For example, one respondent suggested that given the resource constraints that many local authorities have and given the rapid growth of online shopping, it is arguable that it would be more effective if local authorities focussed on a smaller core of retail centres:

“I think, for me, it’s probably better to have a smaller number of good centres, than loads of sprawling, rubbish ones” (Local Authority Planner)

Of course, such an approach would not be without major obstacles, not least, that it might be seen to contradict the underlying objective of the retail hierarchy, which is to make sure that all residents have adequate access to essential retail services. Equally, it is likely that there will be local resistance to any strategy that effectively

seeks to manage the decline of underperforming retail centres, particularly if such an action is seen to be detrimental to the local community.

Several respondents highlighted a similar issue in relation to the sub-optimal location of some existing centres, which would be, in an ideal world, replaced by “more suitably located centres”. The poor location of such centres today was seen to reflect their “strong, rooted history”, which had resulted in many of them becoming spatially entrenched. While they were once located in an ideal location relative to the needs of the local population, the effect of changing market forces had increasingly worked against them, such that today they struggled to remain “relevant” to consumer demands:

“They are historical to a degree. They basically take into account where the main residential populations are and, seek to, well build on that really. Clearly, not all centres are where they need to be, but that’s the point of the hierarchy, to try to confirm their vitality and viability” (Local Authority Planner)

However, any attempt to move them is likely to face resistance, particularly as there will be concerns regarding how smaller independents would fare. The result is that, far from attempting to adopt a new radical approach to retail strategy, local authorities are taking the safer approach, which simply involves seeking to reinforce and protect the existing hierarchical structure.

While it is certainly clear that local authorities agree that continued support for the retail hierarchy is an appropriate strategic approach today, there remains a multitude of contradictions within the rationale of this planning strategy. For example, the town-centre-first approach is fundamentally predicated upon there being significant demand for new retail space, as there was, when the policy was first introduced in the early-1990s. However, given that today, the primary threat for many high streets and town centres is retailers closing down existing stores, as they consolidate their physical portfolios, there seems to be some elemental disconnect regarding how such a policy is intended to combat this issue. While local authorities argue that guiding new development into existing centres is, by itself, designed to alleviate the impact of store closures, this somewhat ignores the growing body of evidence that suggests

that there is little room for further growth in retail, outside of a select number of larger centres. In fact, the view of local retail development owners was that many small and medium-sized towns will continue to see a net fall in occupied retail units until a new “equilibrium” is reached and that an undue focus on policies such as town-centre-first draws attention away from the more pressing issue of finding alternative uses for the excess of retail space:

“I think mid-sized towns will need to change. There’s no point looking for retail investment because it just isn’t there” (Retail Development Owner)

Another instance where there appears to be something of a contradiction-in-terms, is the idea that preserving the existing hierarchy is central to local authorities achieving sustainability in their urban environments. As has been highlighted previously, there was some acknowledgment that certain retail centres have reached a point of no return, with virtually no hope of being revived and which ideally need to be either relocated or replaced. Given this, it is questionable how continued support for such centres, through a wider strategic approach that seeks to preserve and protect the existing retail hierarchy, can ultimately be considered sustainable. Local authorities tend to argue that sustainability, when used in this instance, refers to the promotion of sustainable shopping behaviours and a reduction in environmental degradation, primarily through a reduction in car usage and associated levels of congestion and pollution. They also argue that while maintaining a sub-standard retail centre is not ideal, it is something they “have to do”, in accordance with their social and moral obligations as a local authority. However, as many retail centres today lack the very essential retail services that local authorities are seeking to maintain access to, this obviously raises the question of whether such justification remains valid, because if consumers are required to make multiple trips to different centres in order to access different essential retail services, the benefits of preserving such centres in the existing hierarchy are effectively negated.

12.2.2 Retail as a Foundation of the Town Centre

The preceding section has outlined the primary strategic objective of retail planning policy for local authorities, which is fundamentally targeted towards protecting the

retail hierarchy. But what of the town centres? What role and function are town centres expected to play today and how is retail seen to fit into this? In almost all instances, the town centre is the most well connected part of a town and usually acts as a hub for transportation infrastructure, resulting in a strong belief that these spaces should be the core of the wider urban area. Accordingly, many respondents emphasised the importance of town centres being home to essential public services, such as healthcare facilities and council offices, as well as wider cultural, leisure and retail amenities. Notably, the view of local authorities in regard of retail was that it continues to be a foundational cornerstone of town centres, and is expected to continue being so in the future:

“In 2028...The town centres at Widnes and Halton Lea offer vibrant and busy destinations for people to do their shopping, access services and meet one another” (Halton Council, 2013, p25)

The continued centrality of retail within the town centre is reflected by the designation of the Primary Shopping Area, as part of the local plan, which is considered the principle shopping location within the wider urban area. Despite a move over recent years to try to diversify town centre uses, the primary shopping area remains largely ring fenced, with most local authorities applying a hard limit on the minimum amount of retail space within its boundaries:

“In order to maintain the functionality and vitality of the Town Centre, the Council will seek to ensure that at least 70% of units in the Primary Retail Frontage remain in an A1 retail use and will not support applications within the Primary and Secondary Frontages that will result in the loss of an active ground floor use” (St Helens Council, 2016, p88)

As several respondents pointed out, the main justification for their continued support of the primary shopping area is to make sure that the retail core has sufficient “critical mass” to continue attracting retailers and consumers. By designating a primary shopping area within the local plan, local authorities can more easily control where new retail development occurs, as well as helping the town centre more widely by providing a strong and attractive primary retail environment. Several respondents also noted that in considering weaker centres, these often lack a strong,

centralised retail core, which has resulted in them becoming unattractive to consumers, as their retail offer has increasingly dispersed. In this regard, it was suggested that by tightening and re-focussing the primary shopping area into a smaller area, the town centre offer could be significantly improved and that in accordance with this it is important to have a strategy that prevents non-retail uses becoming a “wedge that splits the retail centre”. Another consideration that was highlighted was the concern that if the amount of non-retail space increases too much within the retail core, it has the potential to precipitate a scenario in which retailers are actually excluded from the primary shopping area, either because there is a lack of available units or because what units there are, are unsuitable, having previously been adapted for a different non-retail use:

“A mix of uses can contribute to ensuring the City Centre continues to be an attractive shopping and leisure destination. A diversity of shopping, leisure, cultural, tourism, food and drink uses can bring significant benefits such as extending the time of a shopping visit and creating a safer more vibrant environment. However, if an increasing proportion of non-A1 uses are permitted within the MRA [Main Retail Area] it could prejudice future retail investment through the reduction of units available for new A1 uses” (Liverpool City Council, 2016, p62)

While the consensus of local authorities was that the primary shopping area should retain a primarily retail based make-up, there does appear to be a willingness to allow some complementary non-retail uses along secondary frontages, particularly towards the peripheral regions of the wider retail area. Many respondents spoke of the importance of being flexible in these areas, especially if there is no forthcoming demand from retail use:

“I think it depends on where it is. I mean, on [the old high street], we’ve allowed some of the units to change; there’s [X], which is a little coffee shop, there’s a tanning salon and also an estate agent. But that’s not the main shopping area, so, I suppose it was needed” (Representative of Economic Investment Board)

In this regard, they noted that any non-retail development that is allowed should be in keeping with consumer demand, should be “appropriate” for the area and, perhaps most critically of all, should be “beneficial” to the overall offer of the town centre. However, while some non-retail development would be acceptable on condition of meeting these terms, there remained an undercurrent of thought that in all instances, priority should always be given to locating as much retail as possible into the retail core of the town centre.

In considering why local authorities continue to emphasise the importance of retail provision within the town centre, one possible reason may be the fact that recent retail studies used to inform the development of local plans have shown that there is scope for future growth in retail provision:

“Due to the current poor performance of Knowsley’s three existing town centres identified in the Knowsley Town Centres and Shopping Study, there is a need for additional comparison floorspace primarily focused in Huyton, Kirkby and Prescott. The anticipated scale and distribution of this need is based on increased levels of expenditure retention in Knowsley centres ranging from a 'moderate' increase (a 10% rise) to a 'significant' increase (a 15% rise)” (Knowsley Council, 2016, p72)

These studies would seem to contradict wider industry evidence, which seems to suggest that any future growth in retail provision is likely to be limited to a small number of much larger centres or to those locations that are currently experiencing significant population growth. In fact, the validity and accuracy of such studies is even questioned by local authorities themselves, many of whom admit that it is now incredibly hard to predict the future need for retail space. Nevertheless, it is clear that local authorities continue to plan for new retail development within town centres, often as part of wider regeneration initiatives:

“The Barons Quay development site represents a significant opportunity for the regeneration of Northwich Town Centre, public realm and environmental improvements and an improved and expanded retail offer within the town. Planning permission has been secured for Barons Quay which includes the construction of a comprehensive leisure and retail-led

mixed-use development totalling up to 40,000m² with associated highways and public realm improvements” (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2015, p33)

The local authority view that retail continues to be a core component of the town centre is not without contradiction, especially in relation to the underlying stability of the retail sector. When asked to consider whether they felt that large multiple retailers could still be relied upon to provide stability in retail environments, it was clear that there was little belief that this remained the case. The overriding consensus of local authorities is that large retail firms have become increasingly “fickle” and while several respondents suggested that there has always been an element of risk in relying upon private enterprise to help support the town centre, the consensus was that today retailers are far more likely to “walk away” when circumstances change. Interestingly, several respondents seemed to acknowledge that this change in retailer approach reflected the changing dynamics of the sector:

“I think the introduction of online shopping has actually killed any reliance upon [chain] retailers, especially for comparison, as lots of shopping for comparison is done online” (Local Authority Planner)

Given this, it seems somewhat counterintuitive that planners continue to rely upon these same firms to provide a foundational piece of the town centre offer and perhaps more bizarrely, do so in a manner that actively limits the amount of non-retail use, as is the case with the primary shopping area. Of course, local authorities will argue that they have a defined rationale for why they do this, but whatever their reasoning may be, it is questionable whether such an approach can continue to be viewed as sustainable in today’s retail climate. The peculiarity of this strategic position is further emphasised when the views of local retail development owners are considered. Development owners are generally in agreement that, with the exception of a small number of locations, the general trend of retailers leaving town centres is likely to continue, until retail firms have “rebalanced their portfolios” in accordance with contemporary consumer demand. Notably, it was suggested by respondents that in instances when a retailer owns one or more stores within a region, it will be stores

located within small and mid-sized town centres that will be the most likely to close first, further emphasising the idea that such chains can no longer be relied upon.

12.2.3 Creating a Destination Experience

While the overall rhetoric of local authority planning strategies emphasises the need to preserve and protect the existing provision of retail, there is clear evidence that planners also believe that town centres need to diversify their offer. It is widely acknowledged by local authorities that the role and function of the town centre is changing and while retail has traditionally been the primary draw for visitors, it is now accepted that town centres need to offer something more:

“If you’re gonna [sic] get people into the town centre, it’s got to be for something much more than just going to a shop and buying something, it’s got to be the experience overall ” (Local Authority Planner)

Local retail development owners’ share this view, suggesting that small and medium sized towns in need of redevelopment must find “alternative sources” of investment and should “focus on getting the basics right” like making sure the town centre environment is clean, attractive and safe. They also advocate town centres providing a wide ranging and balanced offer, and suggest that rather than seeing the internet as a threat, local authorities should “see it as an opportunity” to build an offer that is more than the online-only environment can provide. Essentially, they argue that doing nothing is not an option and that success will only come through a process of innovation and adaptation:

“If you follow the logic that this will happen, so what do you do, you either let it happen, you fight the planning or you keep updating yourself so you stay more compelling, that’s the positive way of reacting” (Retail Development Owner)

Of course, this is not to say that retail has no role to play, with development owners acknowledging that many firms maintain only a physical presence. The core issue is, however, that retail provision alone is “no longer sufficient to attract consumers” and local authorities and private owners alike need to focus on the creation of a destination experience.

Despite this, most local authorities suggested that their preferred use of space in town centres would continue to remain retail; however, in instances where there is low retailer and consumer demand, it may be necessary to consider embracing and accepting investment from other sectors. While the scope for diversification is vast, the success of larger towns and major out-of-centre retail developments is often attributed to their ability to provide a “destination experience”, which enables consumers to not only access a wide range of shops, but also a variety of cafes, restaurants and bars, as well as leisure and cultural amenities:

“As a shopping environment, if you’ve got very good restaurants, it’s really important... and good art and good sculptures and good landscaping and just sought of feeling like it’s a nice place to be” (Retail Development Owner)

Similarly, leisure amenities are also seen to contribute to the evening economy of the town centre, as their peak operating hours tend to be after the shops have closed. In fact every single local authority made reference to the importance of making sure that town centres “become more family-friendly” in the evening, citing the rise of a drinking culture as being a contributory factor in the decline of many town centres.

The move to increase the amount of leisure space within town centres reflects a growing pattern among consumers who are increasingly engaging with more than just retail when they shop. What is particularly interesting about this trend, as one respondent noted, is that far from being a new process, it is in actuality a reversal of the trend that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, when many town centres lost leisure amenities, due to both the growth of out-of-centre developments and the rise of home entertainment systems. As such, it is important to bear-in-mind that, while an increase in leisure amenities is likely to improve the attractiveness of a town centre, it may not necessarily reverse the loss of consumers and retailers, as there may already be well-established leisure venues outside of the town centre.

One of the main issues that planners have to deal with in regard of increasing the leisure offer is the question of where new development should be located. Ideally it would be expected that these amenities should be located as close to the retail core as possible; however, as has already been illustrated, many local authorities continue to

advocate enforcing the principles of the primary shopping area, which seeks to limit the amount of non-retail development within these areas. That being said, there is some evidence that in instances when a local authority is struggling to find retail occupiers, a softer stance may be taken:

“The vitality and viability of town centres in general has been affected by the recent difficult economic climate. If proposals involve bringing a vacant unit (formerly Class A1) back into use, the Council will consider whether the benefits of encouraging economic activity by bringing a vacant unit back into active use outweighs the loss of A1 floorspace. This would most likely be the case when the unit in question had been vacant for several months and efforts to market it for retail use had proved fruitless” (West Lancashire Council, 2013, p119)

Nevertheless, the dominant strategic view of local authorities is that any non-retail uses within a town centre should be located towards the periphery of the shopping area, to avoid compromising the core retail offer. Accordingly, a common strategy that many local authorities are moving towards is the development of a defined leisure quarter within the town centre, which sits adjacent to, or slightly overlaps with the retail core, but does not actually infringe upon the retail offer. Interestingly, such a strategy was rationalised by several respondents upon the basis of making sure that different parts of the town centre “do not unnecessarily compete with one another” and instead act as “complementary pieces”. For this reason, it is often emphasised that the success of such a strategy will be dependent upon making sure that all of the various different uses within the town centre are “effectively connected to one another”.

While the shift towards increased leisure and eatery provision within town centres seems to be a near universal trend, it is important to note that leisure, just like retail, can be classified into different tiers, based upon both its attractiveness and prestige. Not all leisure or food & drink outlets are viewed equally and some have the potential to do more harm than good. For example, almost every respondent expressed concern over the increasing proliferation of fast-food takeaways in many

weaker centres, as well as suggesting that an over saturation of drinking establishments can “contribute to the negative perception” of a place:

“People always say it would be nice if there were more restaurants or coffee shops, but the thing is, it’s just that most of the applications we get are from kebab shops or off-licenses” (Local Authority Planner)

For many there was a concern that such uses may actually be contributing to the decline of these centres not only because of the negative perception they create, but also because they can contribute to creating “dead space” during daylight hours. For planners, there is an obvious dilemma between striving to broaden the leisure offer as much as possible and making sure that what leisure provision there is, is appropriate for the town centre. Several respondents pointed to the fact that, just as larger, more attractive retail centres “tend to attract the biggest and best retailers”, so too they tend to attract the biggest and best restaurants and leisure amenities. Local retail development owners agree, suggesting that while replicating the success of larger, more diverse centres is understandable, the key to success comes from understanding what provision is “right for the local area”. They argue that planners therefore need to balance a desire to increase the non-retail provision within the town centre, with a need to make sure the town centre remains an attractive place to visit.

In light of this, several local authorities accept that alternative non-retail and non-leisure uses may be required, in order to help support the continued vitality and viability of town centres. In general, the success of any centre will be related to its ability to make sure its provision of retail is right for its catchment area, including making sure that it is sized appropriately relative to its catchment population. In instances where a town centre appears to have become oversized relative to demand, it is now accepted that the retail core may need to be tightened and in instances when appropriate complementary leisure uses are not forthcoming, land may need to be transferred to an alternative use. In most instances, the preferred alternatives tend to be other main town centres uses, such as offices and commercial space or public services. However, there is growing acceptance that in some cases residential development may be the best option, particularly if it forms part of a wider, more sustainable mixed-use regeneration initiative. This is a view shared by local retail

development owners who similarly argue that some existing centres likely have no viable alternative:

“I think that there are some of these mid-sized town centres that some of these arcades are probably going to be repositioned into residential... you ensure success by removing retail, focussing those uses that have a need and have a purpose for the local catchment, you rationalise that a smaller, more concentrated area and actually the space that you’ve freed up, you turn into a different use” (Retail Development Owner)

While such strategies continue to be seen as a last-resort in the case of the retail core, increasing the working or residential populations of the wider town centre is generally viewed more positively by local authorities. Many respondents saw clear benefits to increasing the number of people who work or live within the town centre, both in terms of creating new market demand and also in terms of “improving the vibrancy” of these places. Similarly, there was some agreement that new residential development within the peripheral regions of the town centre can also help to “address housing shortages” that many towns are faced with. Interestingly, local retail development owners tended to speak more enthusiastically about the importance of wider non-retail and non-leisure uses, emphasising that the success of any retail centre will ultimately come down to the wider offer. For this reason, anything that increases the nearby working or residential population was viewed positively, as were other developments that increased the attractiveness of the local area, including cultural amenities or green spaces. While there was plenty of evidence that local authorities agreed in principle to this idea, many cautioned that such changes in use would need to be carefully thought out and planned for, because any significant change in the working or residential population of the town centre would be likely to place “extra strain” on existing public services and transport infrastructure.

An interesting caveat to the discussion regarding the expansion of residential space within town centres emerged when the issue of property conversion was considered. Despite the government amending planning laws to make it easier to convert retail units into residential premises, several respondents expressed a belief that such an

approach was unlikely to be effective, in part because the process was so “inefficient”. The amendments required to convert a retail unit into residential space are considered to be both costly and complex given the “differing regulations that cover residential premises” as compared to commercial property. As such, most of the respondents did not consider such an approach worthwhile, instead suggesting that new development would be “preferential”. However, this is itself problematic because older buildings in town centres are more likely to have heritage protections, which can act to inhibit or severely restrict new development. For this reason, several respondents suggested that their preference was for “finding an alternative use for excess retail space”, rather than looking to convert it to residential premises:

“I can see the sense that if we are in a position to convince the owner of the shops to knock down shops and create housing, that would be beneficial for the whole of the town centre..., but how do we help an organisation, a business like that to make such a decision, that’s really hard to do” (Local Authority Planner)

What is clear from discussing the diversification of town centres with local authorities is how many of them are seeking to emphasise the uniqueness of town centres, when compared to both out-of-centre retail developments and neighbouring centres. Local retail development owners tend to agree, although while this is clearly a “logical” step, they do question what such an approach is likely to look like for the majority of town centres. In the case of a small number of locations, a unique selling point will be largely self evident, such as with market towns or locations with sites of specific historical importance; however, this will not be the case for the majority of town centres, meaning that these places will need to find an alternative distinguishing feature. In most instances, respondents suggested that this would involve emphasising the presence of a specific institution or public service that, while not being inherently ‘unique’, is “unlikely to be present in neighbouring towns” (e.g. hospital, university, council office or sports arena). While this can be seen as a logical approach, it does raise the issue of whether or not uniqueness in terms of a town centre offer, is something that the majority of locations can aspire to. One respondent seemed to suggest that some town centres are destined to be less successful for exactly this reason:

“If [x] had been an historic town with a cathedral, with a nice market and an old church... if it had been in a sense, let’s say, a conservation area then, with heritage and the like, then you know people would take more pride in it and it would probably be more successful in that sense”

(Respondent for Local Economic Investment Board)

Perhaps this is a reason why so many local authorities are looking to replicate the success of larger centres, through what appear to be fairly homogenised diversification programmes, because there is a subconscious acceptance that these locations are unlikely to be able to define their own unique proposition. Whatever the case, it is certainly clear that this diversification of the town centre forms the most radical component of contemporary retail planning strategy, which speaks considerably to the underlying entrenchment of traditional planning principles.

12.2.4 Stakeholder Engagement and Neighbourhood Planning

As part of the planning process, it is necessary to consider a variety of factors when making decisions, including considering the viewpoints of stakeholders who are likely to be impacted by development. For this reason, stakeholder engagement, whether that be with investors, local community groups or end users, is a critical component of the planning process and one that can have a significant impact on the ultimate outcome. In considering the importance of effective stakeholder engagement, all respondents agreed that both public and private sector interests “bring something to the table”. Accordingly, it was acknowledged that “effective communication” and “collaboration” between these two groups is critical to enabling development to occur, because in many instances, one cannot function without the other. However, many local authorities expressed frustration at how problematic it can be to engage with certain private sector stakeholders, in particular land and property owners. Many respondents suggested that this was often because these groups are not interested in getting involved, especially if there is no prescribed benefit for them. Interestingly, for local retail development owners, this illustrated a problem that many high streets and town centres face, whereby the fragmented nature of ownership leaves them lacking a clear, unified vision of what they should look like. They argue that retail sites in single ownership tend to perform better, because it is far “easier to respond to challenges” in a timely and coordinated manner

when there is a single owner. While local authorities tend to agree with this assertion, many respondents pointed out that they lack the required financial resources to acquire and bring together land and property into a single site.

In some regards, local authorities are in unique position on this issue because many are also the single owners of a large retail development site themselves. While single ownership does have prescribed advantages, most respondents suggested that without resources to invest, they can do little more than to “help keep them afloat”, in what are very challenging conditions. This view contrasted with local retail development owners, who emphasised the importance of a “proactive mindset”, underpinned by a process of continual investment and “improvement”:

“... first you need to get the basics right. Is it clean? Is it safe? Are there places to sit? Is the environment attractive? Those sorts of things. If you focus on the small things it can make a huge difference” (Retail Development Owner)

For them, listening to and engaging with retailers is crucial, because many of them are undergoing major structural and organisational change, as they seek to adapt and survive. However, as one local authority respondent noted, this was typical behaviour from the private sector, which is more than willing to invest when the market is up, but have a tendency to “walk away when the rot sets in”. For several local authorities, there was a perception that they are left to support the weakest centres and even though they would like to be able to do more, sometimes that just is not possible.

In considering more formalised arrangements of stakeholder collaboration, such as Business Improvement Districts and the wider practice of Town Centre Management, most respondents noted that, while such mechanisms are popular and do enable local stakeholders to influence local decision making, they operate outside of the planning system and are primarily concerned with addressing non-planning related issues. While there are some instances when planning matters may be raised, such as parking and vehicular accessibility, interaction with the planning system tends to be limited and, as such, they are considered to have little benefit as a mechanism for cooperation on planning issues. When challenged on whether this disconnect

between planning and the wider management of town centres was an issue, most respondents expressed resignation that was just how things were:

“I think there is a lack of [joined up thinking], especially at the national level. I mean, there’s a lack of joined up thinking on national strategy, business rates, car parking charges, all that, it all plays a part, but you are limited to the bits you can control” (Local Authority Planner)

One area where local authorities tend to see less engagement than desired is at the cross boundary level. Planning guidance emphasises that local authorities are expected to cooperate and coordinate their actions on a range of issues including transport, economic development and regeneration. However, most respondents suggested that, as things currently stand, local cooperation on issues related to planning and regeneration tends to be limited, focussing only on major infrastructure projects or planned developments close to the boundaries between local authorities. While many would like to see more coordinated collaboration with neighbouring authorities, the extent to which this is likely to change under the operation of new combined authorities is yet to be seen.

While the level of stakeholder engagement between local authorities and other public and private sector interests tends to be highly dependent upon the requirements of their working relationship, levels of engagement with local residents and community groups tends to be far more varied. As with cross boundary collaboration, the government would like to see greater levels of community involvement in planning and with the introduction of Neighbourhood Planning, they believe there is now a platform through which local residents and community groups can directly influence local planning strategy. Many local authorities expressed reservations about whether this would make planning any more accessible to local people, with several respondents pointing out that they already look to “engage with local communities” through pop-up shops or drop in events. Several respondents also noted that although direct consultation with the local population is primarily intended to gather their “views, opinions and concerns”, it can also serve as an important platform for the local authority to “get their message out there”, and explain why the planning decisions are being taken are as they are.

While all local authorities support the principle of increased community engagement in planning, many respondents expressed concern regarding whether or not the practice can ever be truly useful, given the inherent complexity of the planning system. Several respondents pointed out that local residents and community groups tend to see things in a very black-and-white manner, often drawing a “simplistic” distinction between good and bad development:

“The view of the public is normally very fragmented, there’s no consistent view, but I don’t think really that, I think there’s a tendency for certain people to take a very narrow view and usually they’re the ones that keep talking and keep pushing, even after a decision has been made”
(Local Authority Planner)

As a result, even in instances when local planners and residents agree on the need for development, local community groups can tend to be very stubborn regarding how they believe such development should occur. This narrow-mindedness tends to lead these groups into not accounting for wider considerations, which can significantly “derail” discussion from where it needs to be. As the most vocal community voices in planning matters often tend to come from those opposed to development, the result can be an undue weight is being placed on their views, while the views of the “silent majority” go unheard. This bias tends to manifest itself in the nature of discussion between planners and local community groups, which tend to focus on the negatives of a project rather than the positives:

“Planning has to address some difficult issues and there are benefits and disbenefits [sic] of every decision which is made; unfortunately the community tend to perceive the disbenefits [sic] more greatly” (Local Authority Planner)

Many local authorities expressed their belief that engagement with local communities on planning matters can only be successful if all community groups are given an equal platform on which to express their opinions. More often than not, however, respondents felt that it tended to be the more affluent and better educated groups that dominate planning discussion in local communities with the deprived, elderly and less mobile more likely to be marginalised. Interestingly, this view

mirrored a wider argument that far from creating greater community inclusivity in planning, the Coalition government's Localism agenda actually risks furthering issues of social exclusion by allowing those "with the greatest political leverage [to] benefit whilst those with less capacity lose out" (Lucas, 2012, p111).

While local authorities will always try to factor in local viewpoints when making decisions, the reality is that more often than not, the demands and expectations of local community groups are too unrealistic, usually being shaped by an "overly nostalgic view of the local area". All respondents were unequivocal in their view that while incorporating and mediating legitimate concerns was something that all planning authorities should strive for, "unrealistic demands" that "compromise the delivery of a project" cannot be accommodated. Several local authorities also noted that there is often a contradiction between what local communities say and do, citing the example of local residents proclaiming their desire for a vibrant town centre and local shopping parades, but then going home and shopping online or in the supermarket. Another issue that was raised was that local residents and community groups often get "bogged down" in the minutiae of planning decisions, rather than seeing the bigger picture. Similarly, these groups also have a tendency to focus on issues that are beyond the remit of planning, such as crime and anti-social behaviour or make "unrealistic demands of planners" regarding what type of retail they want:

"Local communities are rightly concerned about what's happening immediately on their door step and they do have different issues and concerns... [but] they often don't have the understanding with regards to the planning system, as to what the planning system can and can't do"
(Local Authority Planner)

When all of this is taken together, it results in a general perception within local authorities that although community engagement is important; unnecessary and excessive involvement of local residents and community groups has the potential to cause more harm than good.

12.2.5 Other Strategic Approaches and Considerations

Planners are aware that there are limitations over what they can control and they accept that, as a result, sometimes decisions that may not be perceived as positive by

the local community or local businesses may be the best they can achieve without additional resources or power. An example of this that was pointed out by several respondents, is the perception that many weaker centres tend to have a “proliferation of downmarket occupiers”, ranging from pound shops and bookmakers to charity shops and takeaways. Equally, however, their presence can also reflect the “buoyancy” of the local town or retail centre, which may have a relatively low vacancy levels, with a “strong consumer base” and good sales for the retailers. Several respondents noted that although the presence of such occupiers tends to be interpreted as evidence that a centre is “struggling” to attract mid-market retailers or independents, it does not inherently imply that it is “failing”. The underlying problem, as one respondent suggested, is that consumers are “fickle” creatures, “who make snap judgements” on retail centres based upon the type of retail provision, which creates a dilemma for local planners who must try to balance the public’s expectations of how retail spaces should be, against the realities of what they can be in the retail climate today:

“The question we have to ask... is it better to have a vacant unit or a unit that is filled, be it with a charity shops or fast food takeaway” (Local Authority Planner)

It is easy to see, therefore, why every single respondent stated that it was their belief that it was better to have an occupied unit, whatever that use may be, than having an empty one, because, as one respondent put it, “vacant units will always be the surest sign that a retail centre is failing”. Part of the reason for this is that local authorities tend to take a more pragmatic view when it comes to the type of retail provision that can realistically be provided in any given centre. As one respondent suggested, for many centres, these downmarket retailers play a crucial role in “supporting the provision of retail” to the local community and not only is it unfeasible for many centres to go after mid-market and upper-market retailers, it is also highly impractical. The problem is that many local councillors do not take this view and echoing the sentiments of local residents, often take the position that they would rather have a vacant unit:

“I think the officer view would be that an occupied unit... can help add to the vitality and viability of the centre... however, if you were to ask members... they can't see what the harm is in having a vacant unit”
(Local Authority Planner)

For many local authorities and local retail development owners this speaks to the importance of knowing your local target demographic and making sure that the retail offer is tailored to their needs. Larger centres will be targeting younger and more affluent groups, who are more likely to live and work in the centre, as well as frequent it for other uses (e.g. bars, clubs, theatres etc). For smaller and mid-sized centres, there may need to be an acceptance that targeting these groups is likely to be unfruitful and that they will be better served seeking to attract other groups or uses. However, as one local retail development owner pointed out, it is critical not to focus on “too narrow” a target demographic, otherwise you risk the centre becoming characterised by its limited user base and retail offer, which may be “off-putting” to potential new consumers.

In a similar vein, another factor that must also be considered when formulating a retail planning strategy is what the catchment area is, both for the entire authority and for the individual retail centres within. Several respondents noted that making sure that the retail offer is “appropriate for the local retail catchment” is crucial, because if the catchment size is off, it can severely weaken the centre's attractiveness to both consumers and retailers. Admittedly, as more than one respondent pointed out, this can sometimes be a challenge because “expectations and reality rarely match”. All local authorities would like to keep as much retail spend within their town centres as possible, the problem is, in today's retail climate any real expectation of consumer or retailer loyalty has all but gone.

The reduction in both consumer and retailer loyalty reflects another consideration that planners have to deal with, which is uncertainty. Local retail planning strategies, along with wider economic and regeneration strategies for the region, are usually formulated to cover an extended period, often ranging from 15 to 25 years. Yet, as the rapid evolution of digital technology has shown, it is impossible to predict accurately what retail will look like this far into the future. Similarly, the empirical data sources often used to inform local policy and strategy are themselves

acknowledged as time-sensitive, requiring constant monitoring and amendment. Not only this, but changes in the political, economic and statutory climate can all fundamentally derail a well laid out plan and the net result, as several respondents pointed out, is that strategies tend to be relatively “cautious and conservative”, with built in flexibility to adapt to circumstances. What may be the appropriate strategic position at one point in time may not be appropriate at a later point and, as one respondent noted, “spending money is no guarantee of success”. However, while this may be true, it is important to bear-in-mind that doing nothing is likely to be far more damaging, with retail development owners cautioning against a “wait-and-see approach”, arguing that the most successful retail destinations are those that constantly invest in and develop their consumer offer:

“We market, we merchandise, we work on the environment, we constantly revitalise, we’re very, very active, hands on managers and developers and owners, which is so different to a typical town centre”
(Retail Development Owner)

As a caveat to this, it was notable that while local authorities acknowledged the importance of investing in the physical upkeep of retail centres wherever possible, they tended not to emphasise marketing as part of this strategic approach. This represented something of a sharp contrast with local retail development owners, who emphasised the importance of marketing in helping to create a “positive perception” of retail centres. Interestingly, these respondents felt that local authorities too often only viewed the expense associated with marketing, which was inhibiting them from taking advantage of the prescribed benefits it could have:

“People need to see marketing as an investment rather than a cost”
(Representative of Economic Investment Board)

The issue of uncertainty in many areas means that local authorities are increasingly looking at ways to create a more stable foundation upon which to support their retail offer. Previous discussion addressed the move towards diversifying the town centre offer; however, another possible avenue that many local authorities have considered is to create more employment opportunities in order to increase the potential consumer base. Several respondents spoke of some towns becoming developmental

“donuts”, with significant levels of investment and development in the periphery, but “little in the centre”. As a result, demand for retail space adjacent to areas of new investment tends to be higher, putting further pressure on the town centre, which may already be struggling to retain consumer spend. Of course, just as with retail and leisure, those businesses that retain a preference for town centre sites (e.g. financial services, business management) tend to be highly discerning with regards to where they locate, meaning that smaller and mid-sized centres often “lose out” to their larger and “more attractive” neighbours. Several respondents suggested that is usually because smaller towns lack high quality commercial space and a skilled local labour force, as well as because these centres tend to be “poorly connected to the wider economy”. Interestingly, many local retail development owners argue that because of this problem, it would be more feasible and cost effective to focus on residential uses, with more than one respondent suggesting that “sitting around and waiting” for new retail, leisure or commercial investment is “unlikely to be an effective long-term strategy”. However, as we have already seen, many local authorities continue to view residential development in the town centre as being a last resort.

One final consideration that was noted by some respondents was the issue of the environment and, in particular, the need for local authorities to balance economic investment and growth against social, ethical and environmental concerns. Most respondents referred to issues such as protection of the greenbelt, the preservation of the historic environment and protection of public services, as being regular considerations in the development of a local retail planning strategy. Several respondents pointed out that it is an inevitability that most schemes will see local planners “come into conflict” with one or more community groups, and while they will do all that they can to “mediate community concerns”, this can be hard when they are being “pressured” to promote economic interests by local councillors. While local authorities argue that they always try and do what is in the best interests of the local area, this can sometimes mean them “compromising” on their principles in order to prevent a potential loss of economic investment.

12.3 The Public vs. Private View: Different Paths, Different Destinations

In comparing the views of local authorities and local retail development owners on the issue of how retail centres should respond to the challenges they face today, it is clear that there is some divergence between their viewpoints. In general, we can see that local authorities believe that existing planning principles should remain as they are, with a renewed emphasis on limiting new retail development outside of the town centre. Central to local retail planning strategies today is an emphasis on preserving and protecting the existing retail hierarchy, as well as limiting the amount of new retail development outside of town centres. Both of these represent a broad continuation of previous planning approaches. Admittedly, there is evidence of a softening of the traditional planning stance on some issues, such as the emerging acceptance that town centres will need to diversify to survive and a broader acknowledgement that planning needs to be more 'flexible' when it comes to the potential uses of retail space. Nevertheless, such positions are frequently qualified with an assertion that they are a secondary preference, with the underlying view that retail use of retail space is always the desired option.

One particularly interesting point to note, is that while local planners will talk openly about the wider processes of change needed within existing retail centres, local retail planning policy, as put forward in the emerging local plans, tends to largely omit this. One area where this is particularly noticeable is on the issue of digital retail, which represents arguably the biggest threat to high streets and town centres today. While local authority respondents spoke clearly about this issue, and how adaptation would be necessary for survival, local planning literature makes only passing reference to this and without ever expanding upon it. This contrasts with the stance of local retail development owners and the wider retail sector, who are increasingly putting the need to respond and adapt to digital retailing at the heart of what they do. Interestingly, it came across the many local authorities still viewed the processes of change today as being reversible, even though all evidence points to the loss of high streets shops being a permanent trend.

Delving a little deeper suggests that part of this may be due to fact that local authorities maintain a fundamentally different 'conceptualisation' of the threat posed by digital retailing. While retailers and development owners recognise that retail is

going through an irrevocable process of change, where the old rules of competition no longer apply, evidence from local retail planning policy and strategy would seem to suggest that this view might not be shared by local authorities. For them, competition is still something defined in geographical terms, often as a loss of trade to a neighbouring centre or, as the significant competition posed by existing retail developments outside of the retail hierarchy:

“The role of [Chester] as a destination for shoppers has weakened due to increased competition not only from larger centres such as Liverpool but at a local level from the significant expansion and changing retail offer from out of centre retail parks and out of town shopping centres, in particular Cheshire Oaks” (Cheshire West and Chester Council, 2015, p11)

While geographical competition does still exist in retail, the processes of change occurring through the emergence of new digital platforms and subsequent changes in consumer behaviour, speak to a far more profound change in the relationship between consumers and retailers; one which is likely to require a completely new planning outlook. However, evidence from interviews conducted as part of this research project point to local retail planning strategies continuing to be defined in terms of traditional theoretical, conceptual and ideological principles.

12.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to examine and explore the contemporary formulation of retail planning strategies, and to consider how these can be understood in relation to ongoing processes of change within the retail sector. In it, it has been shown that although local authorities have a clear understanding of the processes of change occurring within retail today, the general tendency is for planning strategies to be based upon historical conceptualisations of retailing. In this sense, rather than viewing the contemporary challenge of digital retailing and high street decline, as being part of a broader structural shift in the behaviour of consumers, local planning authorities are continuing to define them in relation to traditional conceptual and ideological principles, which is resulting in a tendency towards viewing these problems as being issues of spatial competition and structural

supply-side weaknesses. The critically of this, is that this may result in the false presumption that the processes of change occurring today, are in some way reversible, despite the fact that wider sectoral evidence says otherwise.

13 PATH DEPENDENT AND RISK AVERSE: IS RETAIL PLANNING INHIBITED BY A CULTURE OF FEAR?

13.1 Introduction

The preceding two chapters have presented the findings from a series of interviews conducted as part of this research project, which were designed to explore how local authority planning strategies for retail development are being formulated. In doing so, they have provided an insight into the core influences over strategic decision making today. The purpose of this chapter is to build upon this, by exploring these influences in more detail, in order to determine the extent to which present-day retail planning strategies can be seen to exhibit evidence of path dependence, as well as trying to ascertain why this continues to be the case. The chapter begins by analysing the responses received from the interviews, in order to determine whether there is evidence to support the assertion that retail planning is path dependent (section 13.2). Following on from this, it will be considered why it is that certain historically pervasive influences continue to maintain a hold over decision-making in retail planning. In doing so, it will be proposed that path dependence, in this regard, may be reflective of the increasingly risk averse behaviour of planners, which is itself hypothesised to be an outcome of the underlying psychological influence of ‘fear’, as an emotional state in planning practice (section 13.3).

13.2 Path Dependence in Contemporary Retail Planning

The preceding two chapters have examined the formulation of contemporary local authority retail planning strategies, which are ostensibly aimed at stemming and reversing the decline of high streets and town centres, as well as promoting retail environments that meet the needs of consumers today. In doing so, they have explored the main issues facing retail environments and the likely causes of these, as well as assessing contemporary planning strategies that seek to address these problems. They have also considered the extent to which the views of local planning authorities match those of other local stakeholders, as well as wider evidence from the retail sector. It has subsequently been shown that, although local authority planners have a fairly clear and concise understanding of the core issues and causes of decline today, they are continuing to conceptualise contemporary challenges in relation to certain historically pervasive ideas, which has resulted in a tendency for contemporary strategic responses to maintain a large degree of continuity with how things have been done in the past. In this sense, it is arguable that, far from being an objective assessment of the contemporary processes of change in retail, modern-day retail planning strategies reflect deeply embedded and highly pervasive ideas regarding the form, function and purpose of retail environments.

13.2.1 The Historical Influences of Contemporary Retail Planning

In considering the evidence presented in Chapters 11 and 12, it is proposed that there are three identifiable strands of historically pervasive influence in the contemporary practice of planning for retail development. Firstly, it is suggested that many of the issues being encountered in retail environments today, are a legacy of retail planning decisions made in the past. Secondly, the emphasis on preserving and protecting the existing retail hierarchy, speaks to a continuing conceptualisation of the expected form and function of retail centres, which is fundamentally based upon traditional theoretical ideas. Finally, despite the significant operational limitations placed upon them in terms of power and resources, planners continue to define retail-planning objectives in terms of traditional ideological principles, most notably a social imperative to maintain accessible retail provision for all local residents.

The first of these strands posits that the physical retail environment that exists today can be partially attributed to several decades of planning policy and action, through

which retail firms and developers have been restricted from completely reshaping retail environments in accordance with market forces. Various aspects of retail today, ranging from in-town covered shopping malls, to suburban retail parks and retail-dominated linear high streets, all exist in part, because of past planning actions. This is something that planners are acutely aware of, as was noted in Chapter 11, and while many aspects of the current retail environment would be the same today even if market forces had free rein over development, it is likely that many more would be different. For this reason, it is plausible to suggest that, as contemporary retail environments have been fundamentally shaped by decades of planning action, the planning problems that exist today are, to some degree, bound up in the historical actions of planners.

In considering this suggestion in more detail, it is arguable that based upon Mahoney's (2000) classification of path dependence, this contingent relationship can be considered an example of a reactive sequence, wherein each decision taken in a chain is dependent upon past steps. For example, if we consider the issues associated with in-town covered shopping centres that were raised in Chapter 11, it is arguable that these issues are partly an outcome of planning decisions made in the 1960s and 1970s, when planners sought to adapt and fit the out-of-town shopping mall into town centres. In this sense, if planners had made different decisions in the past, then some of the issues being faced today would be different too, because the contingent circumstances that have led to contemporary issues would not necessarily have occurred. Similarly, it could be argued that the acute decline of many town centres in general, reflects a repeated failure of local planning authorities to diversify the town centre offer, an issue that was widely acknowledged by interview respondents, as being of critical importance today. In this case, the decision of planners not to apply the sequential approach to all main town centre uses has resulted in a decentralisation of jobs and residents, leaving many town centres highly dependent upon retail. As a result, these towns have been more exposed to the impacts of restructuring in the retail sector today and it is conceivable that, had planners taken a different strategic approach in the past, then the contemporary issues being faced would be different too.

The second of these strands suggests that contemporary planning approaches towards new retail development continue to conceptualise the expected form and function of retail environments in terms of traditional theoretical ideas and principles. As was noted in Chapter 10, the pervasiveness of certain theoretical and conceptual ideas in retail planning, has resulted in the practice becoming highly path dependent and, given the evidence presented in Chapters 11 and 12, there is nothing to suggest that this has changed. While there are many aspects to this, arguably the biggest influence on local authority retail planning strategies today is the retail hierarchy, which serves as a spatial foundation upon which almost all retail-planning decisions are made. As has been previously highlighted, the pervasiveness of a hierarchical spatial arrangement of retail provision is itself evidence of path dependence, because it has been repeatedly reproduced and reinforced within the apparatus of planning, such that the empirical record of most urban centres accords with the historically hypothesised pattern (Brown, 1992). In this sense, despite various forces acting against the structured and ordered principles of traditional theory, planners have continued to view the retail hierarchy as the optimal spatial pattern of retail provision, fighting back against the process of decentralisation with regulatory policies such as town-centre-first. Evidence from the interviews would suggest that continued support for the underlying principles of the retail hierarchy, reflects a continuing belief within planning that the structured and ordered distribution of retail centres remains the correct distributive model of retail.

While the continuing pervasiveness of traditional theoretical and conceptual ideas is most evident with the retail hierarchy, there are other aspects of contemporary retail planning strategy that point to the continuing strength of historically rooted ideas. For example, as was noted in Chapter 12, local planning authorities continue to define the form and function of town centres primarily in relation to retail, such that retail continues to be defined as the primary use of town centre space. As much contemporary evidence seems to suggest that the role of retail is likely to diminish in many town centres, such a view suggests that there is a continuing adherence to a conceptualisation of town centres, fundamentally predicated upon an historical understanding of them as ‘central places’, where consumers and producers come together to buy and sell goods. As was noted in Chapter 10, the pervasiveness of this idea has a lot to do with fact certain conceptual ideas have become codified within

planning policy guidance, most notably town-centre-first; however, one thing that emerged from the interviews conducted as part of this research project, was that the centrality of these principles within local retail strategy, is as much a reflection of the actual beliefs of planners, as it is a reflection of the requirements of the government.

The third and final strand of historical influence in contemporary retail planning relates to the pervasiveness of certain ideological principles that underpin decision-making, most notably that it is a fundamental objective of planning to make sure that all local residents have access to a minimum level of retail provision. As was shown in Chapter 10, planners have always tried to maintain a spatial provision of retail that is socially equitable and accessible to all, usually by supporting investment and continued development within the existing hierarchy of centres. Accordingly, they have sought to limit the amount of retail development that can occur outside of established hierarchies, usually through the imposition of restrictive planning regulations. Over the years, various reforms of planning have both given and taken away powers, which have fundamentally affected the ability of planners to control development. However, as was highlighted in Chapter 10, no matter the dominant socio-political ideology of the government, retail planning has retained remarkable continuity in how it defines its ideological purpose, and evidence from the interviews conducted as part of this research project, suggests that this continues to be the case.

In this sense, while the centrality of the retail hierarchy within contemporary retail planning strategies can be seen to reflect the pervasiveness of certain theoretical and conceptual ideas, it can also be seen to reflect the underlying social and moral obligations that planners deem they must uphold. As was noted in Chapter 12, one of the main reasons planners continue to support the retail hierarchy is because it enables them to make sure that all local residents have access to a minimum level of retail provision. Given the well-established and geographically balanced nature of existing hierarchies, many planners view them as a simple and effective foundation upon which they can meet this obligation. As was pointed out in Chapter 10, planning has always been defined as a mechanism through which uneven and inequitable patterns of urban development can be corrected. In this sense, by supporting the existing retail hierarchy, as a means to protect the vulnerable and

needy, planners are continuing to uphold the embedded ideological belief that their actions are fundamentally borne out of a need to protect society and the environment, from the dangers of rampant and unrestrained development.

13.2.2 Identifying the Implicit in the Explicit: Deconstructing the Influences of Retail Planning

So far, this section has built upon evidence presented in Chapters 11 and 12, to argue that the contemporary practice of retail planning continues to exhibit evidence of path dependence. In this regard, it has identified three primary strands of pervasive historical influence, which fundamentally affect the way in which contemporary planning strategies for retail development are being formulated. However, there remain a series of unanswered questions in all of this. If planners are aware of the realities of change in retail, and if they are equally aware that their current strategic positions are in many instances suboptimal, why have they not tried alternative solutions? Why, when it is clear that the optimally identified strategy is not possible, has the overarching response been to revert to doing nothing? Moreover, why is it, that retail-planning strategies are continually drawn back to the safety of well established, albeit largely ineffective, planning approaches?

In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to consider what the explicitly identified influences in contemporary retail planning practice, can tell us about the underlying behavioural disposition of planners. Consider, for example, the continuing adherence to the principles of the retail hierarchy that was highlighted in Chapter 12, and which represents one of the most puzzling contradictions in retail planning. Historical evidence has shown that since the 1970s, retail decentralisation has been an ever-present and powerful force in Britain, which has sought to redefine and reshape the spatial pattern of retail provision. However, such a process has been fundamentally inhibited by planners, who, in seeking to maintain the existing spatial order, have actively sought to constrain decentralisation through restrictive regulatory controls. When we consider that today, technological developments are fundamentally redefining existing conceptualisations of how the exchange of goods needs to take place, there is an obvious question to be asked as to why planners continue to hold these principles to be true. One possible reason for this is that planners may be resistant to new ideas, favouring traditional theory, because its

inherent structure and relative simplicity makes it far more conducive to being used as a basis for planning strategy, than other, more complex ideas. As was noted in Chapter 10, there has been a divergence between retail planning practice and retail planning theory since the 1980s, so much so, that many planning practitioners no longer actively engage with new conceptual ideas. Evidence from the interviews conducted as part of the research suggest that this remains the case, most evidently in relation to the sources of data that form the empirical foundation upon which strategies are based. While many respondents acknowledged the limitations of the quantitative metrics commonly used in retail studies, it was apparent that there was little appetite to explore alternative data sources or conceptual ideas, with one respondent even remarking, “we don’t do theory here”. If planners are unwilling to embrace new theoretical and conceptual ideas, and if academia continues to present new research findings in an overly complicated and abstract manner, then it follows that planning practice will continue to remain devoid of new theoretical input and thus continue to be dominated by traditional ideas.

The notion that planners are resistant to new ideas or, as was suggested in Chapter 10, are ‘risk-averse’, can be seen in other ways. For example, in one interview with a local planner, the impact of a major out-of-centre retail development was discussed at length, during which they argued the development was a major contributor to the decline of nearby town centres. The respondent contended that both the government and local authorities had “failed” to curb developments such as these and that as a result; they were now facing “endemic issues” of decline within traditional retail centres. For this planner, this particular development should not have been allowed to occur where it did in the first place and it certainly should never have been allowed to expand as it had. Interestingly, this view conflicted with the opinions of two other local respondents, one a representative of the private sector and one a representative of a local economic investment board. Both of these respondents asserted that for all its faults, this development was a massive net gain for the local area, being one of the biggest employers in the region and acting as a significant draw for a large number of non-local consumers. For them, its location was irrelevant because its social and economic benefits were clear.

This difference in viewpoints is notable for a number of reasons. Firstly, it suggests that the dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ retail development that was suggested in Chapter 10, remains as strong as ever. In this example, despite all that demonstrable benefits that this development had, planners still viewed it as being fundamentally bad, simply because it existed outside of the traditional retail hierarchy and was, therefore, in competition with other centres. Secondly, it suggests that, on occasions, the pervasiveness of certain ideological principles can serve as a ‘barrier’ to new ways of thinking. In this instance, the underlying desire of planners to make sure “local people have access to local services”, results in a stance that inherently views any development away from the existing hierarchy as being inherently bad. Based upon evidence collected as part of this research project, it is arguable that this view has become so entrenched, that it is fundamentally inhibiting planning authorities from adopting inventive solutions, because they cannot, or will not, conceptualise retail provision in anything other than an ordered hierarchy. This rigidity is most readily apparent within the emerging local plans, which do not consider established retail parks to be part of the existing centre hierarchy, despite many being in existence for well over 30 years. When questioned on this, interview respondents suggested that these locations should not be regarded as centres in strategic terms, because they are “targeted at car borne consumers”. In this sense, it is evidently clear that local planning authorities refuse to accept that retail parks have developed as a natural evolution of retail spaces, instead continuing to view them as socially inequitable and thus ‘bad’ retail development.

In digging deeper, it is possible to determine that one possible reason these views continue to pervade, is that planning stills defines competition in retail, in geographical terms. As new technologies have emerged, there is a growing body of evidence to support the idea that competition in retail can no longer be defined solely in spatial terms. The growth of the internet and widespread use of digital devices has rendered existing assumptions about how consumers and retailers engage in the exchange of goods and services redundant. Yet, as is noted in Chapter 12, planners for the most part, continue to view the threats to retail centres as being other spatially constrained forms of retail. They still refer to towns “leaking trade” to neighbouring centres or identify weaknesses of accessibility or parking, which are deemed to make out-of-town shopping more attractive. Similarly, within the local plans, there remains

a policy emphasis on the need to “limit new development” outside of existing centres, even though by most accounts, the biggest threats today are from retailers closing existing stores or from digital behemoths such as Amazon. In spite of the emerging evidence that suggests that the old model of retail provision is no longer sustainable, planning remains steadfast in support of the retail hierarchy and the centrality of the town centre within in. For planners, retailers are not abandoning the high street because there is no viable future for it in today’s technologically inclined retail sector; they are abandoning the high street because it is not attractive enough, because it cannot compete with retail parks and because it has been failed by successive waves of government policy.

When all of this is taken together, it suggests that retail planning is caught in something of a philosophical battle, where the theoretical and ideological foundations of established practice are being challenged by new conceptual ideas; ideas that not only threaten to invalidate the very knowledge that planners hold dear, but also form part of a broader evolution that has the potential to completely redefine and reshape the most basic assumptions we have regarding urban space. Buying a new pair of shoes online is one thing, but what impact could 3D printers, autonomous transport, or even artificial intelligence, have on the way in which we interact with our towns and cities? Given this, it is arguable that the response of planners has been to revert once more, to a safe, entrenched position that is resistant not only to new ideas, but also to change.

13.3 Nothing Ventured, Nothing Lost: Power, Precedent and a Fear of Losing Control

The preceding section has considered the pervasiveness of certain historical influences in retail planning and in doing so, has shown that retail planning practice remains highly path dependent. In considering why this is the case, it has been proposed that planners may have become resistant to new ideas, most likely because of increasing risk aversion in planning practice more widely. Evidence presented in Chapter 10 suggests that risk aversion should be considered an important influence over decision-making in retail planning, and it is contended here, that evidence collected as part of this research project, lends support to this assertion. In this sense, it is arguable that risk aversion can help to explain why it is that contemporary retail

planning strategies exhibit continuity with previous approaches, in spite of wider evidence that suggest that a fundamentally new approach is necessary.

The final question that remains to be answered, therefore, is why it is that risk aversion has become such a significant influence over how decisions are made in retail planning. In Chapter 10, several different explanations for risk aversion in planning were put forward, including the suggestion that psychological influences, such as emotion, fundamentally affect the way decisions are made. In this regard, it was argued that risk-aversion should not be seen as the default position of planners, but rather should be seen as an outcome of decades of criticism from politicians, academics and the media; criticism that has acted to extinguish ‘hope’, as an emotional state in planning. Following Sturzaker and Lord (2017), it was subsequently proposed that, in the absence of hope, the influence of ‘fear’, as an emotional state in planning, has increased substantially, acting as both a conscious and subconscious influence that permeates into almost every decision that planners make. In this final section, evidence from this research project will be presented, which lends support to the notion that fear has become a significant influence in the development of contemporary retail planning strategies. It will be argued that fear can manifest itself and exist in various different forms, each of which taps into a different, psychologically rooted concern: a fear of the unknown, a fear of blame, and a fear of precedent. However, it will also be proposed that when taken together, each of these ultimately speaks to a much broader emotional concern that permeates throughout the entirety of planning practice: a fear of losing control.

13.3.1 The New Age of Digital Retail: Retail Planning and a ‘Fear of the Unknown’

A fear of the unknown is one of a small number of universal fears that every person on the planet will grapple with at some point during their life. As such, to single it out as a specifically important influence over decision making in retail planning may seem a little unnecessary. However, given the relatively long time scale over which decisions are made and given the fact that planning strategies are often formulated to cover periods well into the future; a fear of the unknown is arguably a more significant influence in planning than it would be in many other professional disciplines. Various theoretical models of behavioural economics and behavioural

psychology have shown that there is a tendency for individuals (and groups) to make decisions relative to the pre-existing status quo, which is used as a frame of reference for determining the potential value of gains and losses associated with any choice made. In examining why this is the case, it has been argued that this tendency reflects a bias decision makers have towards selecting choices with which they are familiar (the Mere Exposure Effect), which in turn, has been suggested to reflect an underlying fear of the unknown. In essence, because we fear the unknown, we also inherently fear change and uncertainty, and, as a result, we have a tendency to exhibit bias towards those things with which we are familiar.

If we consider this idea in relation to research conducted as part of this project, it could be argued that the resistance of planners towards embracing and integrating new theoretical and conceptual ideas that was highlighted in Chapter 12, reflects the Mere-Exposure Effect in action. Several interview respondents spoke of having little time for theory, in part because of resource pressures, but also because much new research is presented in an overly complicated and abstract manner. In this regard, it could be argued that planners fear the unknown (in this case new theoretical and conceptual ideas) because it represents uncertainty. As fear is inherently framed by feelings of uncertainty, fearful individuals will tend to avoid making decisions that increase this uncertainty. Accordingly, retail planning strategies are instead based upon what planners are familiar with (traditional theory), which ultimately acts to reinforce the status quo. In many ways, such an assertion should not be considered surprising, because during the course of the interviews, many of the respondents spoke openly about how uncertainty in the socio-economic, political and statutory climate often results in them taking a more conservative stance. In this sense, far from being a secondary consideration, the need to address uncertainty in planning, is front and centre in the mindset of planners. Given that the normal psychological response in such situations is to seek to minimise uncertainty, it is arguable that planners adopt strategically conservative approaches, because the established familiarity they provide, allows them to retain a sense of control in an otherwise uncertain environment.

Another example of how a ‘fear of the unknown’ may be potentially impacting upon planning strategy relates to the apparent aversion that planners have towards

transferring excess town centre retail-space from within the primary shopping area, to an alternative use. Evidence provided in Chapter 12, showed that this is commonly justified based upon planners not wanting to risk future demand for retail space going unfulfilled, because previously vacant retail units have now been transferred to an alternative use. As such, it is arguable that such a stance is another example of risk-averse behaviour in planning, as there is extensive evidence to suggest that for the vast majority of retail locations, such an outcome is highly unlikely. In this sense, despite the very low risk of this becoming an issue, planners continue to factor this into their strategic positions. In considering why this is the case, it is possible that this may be an example of the ‘Ambiguity Effect’, which, leads to people taking a known loss in an unambiguous situation, rather than taking an unknown loss in an ambiguous one. In this case, planners are presented with a simple choice between maintaining the existing strategy with its known risks (the unambiguous option), or adopting a new strategy that comes with unknown risks (the ambiguous option). While such an explanation is certainly plausible it does raise the question of why the alternative strategy (in this case to allow unused retail space to be transferred to an alternative use) is viewed as being ambiguous, given that wider sectoral evidence suggests the likelihood of a negative outcome is very low. One possible reason may be that, although the risk of the alternative is very low, planners inherently define the alternative option as being one that brings about uncertainty. By reverting to the familiarity of existing strategy, planners are once again able to mediate the level of uncertainty they are experiencing and thus retain a feeling of control over what is going on.

13.3.2 Damned If We Do, Damned If We Don’t: Planning and the ‘Fear of Blame’

The fear of being blamed when things go wrong is an emotionally grounded consideration that anyone in a position of authority or power is likely to factor into their thinking at some point. As evidence presented earlier in this thesis has shown, this is particularly the case in planning, where there is a long and well-established history of planners being blamed when things go wrong. In the context of this research project, the ‘Omission Bias’ would appear to be particularly relevant, because it may help to explain how a fear of being blamed, can manifest itself in

planning action. The Omission Bias holds that people view the negative consequences associated with decision-making action, as being worse than the equivalent negative consequences associated with decision-making inaction. The reason for this, it has been suggested, is that we view a negative outcome associated with a decision-making action, as being causally related and therefore feel greater regret. In other words, it is easier to blame a decision-making action for a negative outcome, than it is for decision-making inaction.

One example of how a ‘fear of blame’ could potentially permeate into the mindset of planners, relates to the willingness of local authorities to take the lead and financially back regeneration schemes in failing retail centres. During the course of the interviews, several respondents outlined ongoing or proposed regeneration schemes within their local authorities, several of which had been stalled for some time. As part of this discussion, one respondent spoke of how the local council had struggled to attract investment for a major regeneration scheme, and that, as a result, they had been required to invest significant amounts of money into the scheme themselves. As a result, the local authority was now committed to driving forward the project themselves and this meant that any blame for failure was likely to fall on them. In considering why such a strategic position was not more commonly adopted, this respondent suggested that, in addition to obvious financial limitations, many local authorities were reticent to get involved, because of the inherent risks that came with it, including the burden of expectation from the local community. In this sense, there was a feeling that while a private developer or retailer could sit on a project for years without much of a stir, if a local council did the same, there would considerably more pressure to “do something”. As the respondent went on to point out, this was already the case for them, with the council being criticised for not only taking on an “overly ambitious” project, but also for “wasting” large amounts of money during a time of austerity and ultimately, for “failing” to regenerate and revitalise the town centre.

Given the potential for criticisms such as this and, factoring in what we know about how the Omission Bias can influence decision-making behaviour, it is perhaps understandable why local authorities may be wary of committing to ambitious regeneration programmes or innovative but risky strategies for town centres. If local authorities and planners are liable to be criticised and blamed for problems, even in

situations when they are proactively attempting to remedy them, then it follows that they may be wary of venturing beyond the safety of well-established ideas, such as the retail hierarchy and town centre first.

It should be noted here, however, that any suggestion that planners are deliberately adopting blame-avoidance strategies should be tempered. As things stand, the manner in which psychological factors influence planners has not been well researched and, as such, it is not possible to determine exactly how fear could manifest itself and influence planning behaviour. Accordingly, it is proposed that the fear of being blamed in this regard may influence behaviour at more of a subconscious level and, in this sense, serve as a frame of reference for the normative behaviours and heuristics upon which decision-making in planning occurs more widely. As such, rather than planners consciously choosing to avoid innovative but risky strategies in order to minimise potential blame, it is perhaps more likely that, as a legacy of repeated criticism and policy reform within retail planning, the very notion of pro-active planning has increasingly given way to more a cautious and reactive mindset, which considers stability to be preferable to change. Whatever the case, it is argued that this example does provide evidence to support the assertion that fear, in whatever form it takes and in whatever way it manifests itself, should be considered a viable influence in the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies.

13.3.3 The Dundee Decision, Case Law and the ‘Fear of Precedent’

A fear of the unknown and a fear of blame are in many ways universally understood emotional influences, which, in the case of planning, are heightened due to the specific contextual circumstances in which decision making takes place. This is not the case for the ‘fear of precedent’, which reflects a much more nuanced and unique disposition in planning, which is heavily rooted in the history of planning practice. For this reason, unlike in the previous sections, there is no established psychological concept or cognitive bias, which can be used to pinpoint how such a fear could exert influence over decision-making behaviour. Instead, in order to identify and understand the existence of such a fear, it is necessary to decode contemporary planning actions, in order to find evidence that contemporary retail planning strategies are influenced by an inherent fear that the decisions made today, could

establish a developmental precedent, which will ultimately have negative consequences in the future.

The idea that planning has a fear of precedent stems from a widely discussed topic that emerged during the course of this research project, which related to a Supreme Court ruling commonly referred to as the 'Dundee decision'. The significance of this ruling was that, even though the court sided with planning authorities, it established a legal precedent regarding how retail planning guidance should be interpreted and enforced. In doing so, it effectively removed the inherent flexibility of certain aspects of planning guidance, which planners had been using as a means to control development, and thus provided private interests with a simple and effective argument that could be used to swing planning decisions in their favour. During the course of the interviews, the Dundee decision was repeatedly cited as major setback to planning authorities, many of whom already lamented their lack of power. What is particularly noticeable about the Dundee decision is how it can be interpreted through the lens of behavioural psychology. Take Ratner and Herbst's (2005) suggestion that even good decisions can become associated with negative emotions. In this case, the planners made a good decision (their decision was upheld by the courts), but one which had unintended negative consequences (precedent was established in favour of private developers) and, as a result, the initial good decision has come to be associated with negative emotions. In this sense, negative emotions have not only become associated with the bad outcome, but also with the decision that led to it. Accordingly, when planners now make decisions, it is arguable that they will always have a lingering emotional concern that such decisions could lead to negative outcomes, no matter how 'good' they are.

Interestingly, the Dundee decision is not the first instance where precedent has been a major issue in retail planning. During the 1980s, a combination of the government's pro-private sector, pro-development stance and the rapid growth of the retail sector, created an environment that emboldened retail developers to be more proactive in pushing for planning approval. As a result, not only did the number of planning applications go up, but also the number of planning appeals and due to the more liberal planning environment at the time, there was a subsequent increase in the number of upheld appeals, often on the basis that planning authorities were applying

planning laws in an unfair or inconsistent manner. While this was, in and of itself, a major issue for planners, it was how these appeals were being decided that was particularly galling. Over time, rather than assessing the individual merits of each case, the government increasingly referred to previous decisions they had made, as a point of reference in current decisions, establishing a *de facto* system of case law precedent (Guy, 2007). As the government's overarching stance at this time was in favour of development, the net result was that significant amounts of new retail development were allowed to occur outside of the town centre; something that many planners contend was the starting point for the town centre and high street decline we see today.

In returning to the empirical data collected as part of this research project, it is possible to identify other instances where a fear of precedent could be influencing the decision-making behaviour of planners. For example, as was highlighted in Chapter 12, planners are generally wary of allowing non-retail development to occur within the retail core, despite the fact that many commentators and industry analysts have suggested that if smaller and mid-sized town centres are to have a viable future, they have to start looking at alternative uses of this empty space. The issue for respondents was that in order for such a change to occur, they would have to allow some development that contravenes existing planning principles, whether this is by increasing the amount of residential or office provision within the retail core or perhaps allowing the number of A1 units to fall below 70% in the primary shopping area. While such action may ultimately be necessary to help regenerate an ailing town centre, it also runs the risk of becoming an established precedent for future planning applications, just as has become the case with the Dundee decision. In this regard, a fear of precedent could serve to discourage proactive and innovative thinking; pushing planners instead, towards the certainty of familiar strategic approaches that effectively do nothing more than to reinforce the status quo.

Given both the historical and contemporary evidence presented here, it is plausible to suggest that the negative emotions associated with such decisions, may have begun to manifest into fear. In this sense, planners, both consciously and subconsciously, fear that decisions they make today, could establish a developmental precedent that will ultimately have negative consequences in the future. Given this, planners are

inclined to adopt strategic approaches that seek to minimise the risk of deviation from established practice and resultant planning appeals, which pushes them towards the safety of established policies such as town-centre-first, and pushes them away from radical and inventive strategic responses, which may be more in keeping with the realities of the retail sector today.

13.3.4 A Gatekeeper without a Gate: Planning's 'Fear of Losing Control'

The preceding subsections of this chapter have provided evidence in support of the supposition that 'fear' should be considered an important influence in the decision-making behaviour of planners. Using existing theoretical concepts from both behavioural economics and psychology, it has been shown that fear can tap into well-established and legitimate psychological concerns. As a result, it is contended that this has contributed towards the continuing pervasiveness of certain historically rooted ideas in retail planning, such as the retail hierarchy and town-centre-first. In this sense, it is proposed that the evidently 'path dependent' nature of retail planning can be seen to reflect the inherently 'risk averse' nature of decision making by planners, which is itself, proposed to be in part, an outcome of the influence of 'fear', as an emotional disposition in planning. While this research has focussed specifically on retail planning, it is suspected that similar manifestations of fear will be evident throughout wider planning practice, although further research would be necessary in order to substantiate this.

The question is, if various strands of fear have permeated throughout planning, and if they exist as unique and context dependent influences of decision-making behaviour, what unifying force ties them together? In this regard, 'control' can be seen to serve as a valid unifying force, because each of the identified forms of fear can equally be interpreted relative to the concept of control in planning. Thus, with a 'fear of the unknown', planners lack requisite knowledge of the future, therefore placing them in a position where they *fear not being in control*; if you don't know how the future will unfold, how can you control it? In the case of a 'fear of being blamed', this can be interpreted as a *fear of having lost control*, because if planners are being blamed for something, then something has inherently gone wrong, and it follows that planning must no longer have control of the situation. Finally, in the case of the 'fear of precedent', the presumption here is that planners have a *fear of losing control*,

because if a precedent becomes established, the ability of planning authorities to control retail development is significantly weakened. As such, it is proposed here that each manifestation of fear is itself a reflection of a more deeply rooted psychological concern in planning, relating to the loss of control. As was noted in Chapter 10, fear is framed by both uncertainty and a lack of control, which results in a tendency towards highly risk-averse decision-making. In this sense, it could be argued that the increasingly risk-averse behaviour of planners reflects an underlying desire to regain some of the control they feel they have lost and, perhaps more notably based upon evidence from this research project, do everything in their power to avoid losing any more.

In order to understand how and why a fear of losing control could become such a dominant emotional influence in planning, it is once again necessary to consider the history of planning practice and, in particular, the sustained and systemic attempts by successive governments to suppress the power of planners. Since the 1980s, the emergence of a neo-liberal ideology within the government has effectively established planning as a political *bête noire*, one that is invariably characterised as a hindrance rather than a help. As such, successive governments have sought to reform planning to make it more conducive to the interests of the private sector, and in doing so they have stripped away a considerable amount of its statutory power. In the context of retail planning, many respondents to this research project, lamented the loss of what were “crude but effective” planning tools, such as the class of goods test. In more recent reforms, the government’s support for neighbourhood planning has been interpreted as a further evolution of the neo-liberal elite’s ‘war on planning’, one which is now seeking to de-professionalise its very practice (Lord et al., 2017). In this sense, no longer, would planning be a well-regarded discipline of experts, akin to doctors or engineers; instead, it would become a hobby of the populace, a Sunday afternoon leisure activity.

Given the history of planning and the repeated attempts to weaken and de-professionalise its practice, it is easy to understand how a fear of losing control could potentially affect the decision-making behaviours of planners. However, one final question remains. Why is it that planners are so emotionally invested in planning? Fear is one of our most primal emotions, rooted at the very heart of our will to

survive. In many instances, it serves as a useful marker for how we should behave, making sure that we always buckle our seatbelt or making sure we are alert when walking home at night. If fear is allowed to fester and grow, it can become a paralysing force, which prevents us from thinking rationally, ultimately taking control of every decision we make. This thesis proposes that the answer may have something to do with the very way in which planners define both themselves and their discipline, because planners, just like architects and engineers, or doctors and teachers, define themselves by what they do. Planning emerged as a discipline of hope, through which the wrongs of urban development could be put right, and through whom a utopian vision of a socially fair and morally just society could be achieved. Planning stood as a defender of the people, that would rein in rampant and destructive urban development and make sure it was fair and balanced: for the many and not the few. As such, planners were themselves optimists, trained and educated to believe that they could make a difference. Over time, however, this idealistic spirit has slowly been crushed, and planning today lacks the vibrant optimism and enduring hope that once defined it. Nevertheless, the interview responses in this research project suggest that planners continue to cling to lingering remnants of that golden age, remaining steadfast that their role remains as it ever has: to serve as guardians of the people. Therefore, to lose control, would represent the final death knell for planning as it once was, taking with it all the hopes and dreams that defined its utopian ideal. To lose control would mean that planners would ultimately lose their *raison d'être* and consequently a little part of themselves. To lose control would leave planners as little more than gatekeepers without a gate.

13.4 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to build upon preceding analysis and further explore the factors that influence the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies, in order to determine why it is that certain historical ideas have been able to pervade in retail planning. In doing so, it has been shown that there are three primary strands of pervasive historical influence in contemporary retail planning, which when taken together suggest that the retail planning practice continues to be highly path dependent. Because of these, contemporary strategic responses to the decline of high streets and town centres exhibit remarkable continuity with past

practice, particularly in relation to way in which they conceptualise the expected form, function and purpose of retail environments. While path dependence does provide a compelling explanation for how this has become the case, in considering why it has become the case, this thesis proposes that path dependence may actually speak to a much deeper and more psychologically rooted aversion to risk, which has resulted in planners becoming increasingly resistance to new ideas. In developing this idea, it has been proposed that emotion and, in particular, 'fear', can help to explain many of the risk-averse tendencies that characterise planning practice. By drawing upon evidence from the interviews conducted during this research project, and by considering the rich theoretical literature on the psychology of decision making, it has been shown that it is possible to link the risk-averse behaviour of planners to the underlying psychological influence of 'fear' and, as such, it is ultimately proposed that 'fear', as an emotional state, should be considered as a viable influence over the decision-making behaviour of planners, in regard of retail development.

14 CONCLUSION

14.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research project has been to explore the formulation of contemporary retail planning strategies in England, in order to determine how and why town-centre-first continues to be a foundation of decision-making in regard of retail development. Accordingly, it is contended that this thesis has successfully addressed this objective, providing not only a compelling, empirically grounded case for *how* town-centre-first has been able to pervade in retail planning, but also by providing a strong, theoretically grounded explanation for why as well. In this sense, it is held that this thesis has made a strong contribution to the growing area of study, which seeks to understand how the process of decision-making occurs in planning, by providing an insight into the factors that influences retail planning strategy at the local level. The purpose of this final chapter is to summarise the main findings of this research project, beginning by returning to the identified research aims that this project has sought to achieve (section 14.2). It will then move on to consider some of the limitations of the research (section 14.3), before considering its wider significance, as well as areas for potential future research (section 14.4).

14.2 Summary of Findings

In the first part of this thesis, it was suggested that the apparent disconnect between the contemporary processes of change in retail and the continued support for town-centre-first in retail planning, warranted attention because it had the potential to obscure from local authorities, the importance of moving away from retail towards a more diversified town centre offer. Accordingly, in Chapter 3, a series of research

aims were identified that it was felt would enable this research project to meet its overarching objective of determining how and why town-centre-first continues to pervade in retail planning. This section will now consider each of these aims in turn, demonstrating how each has been achieved through the research carried out and presented in this thesis.

Aim One – To understand the historical evolution of retail planning policy and strategy in England and to evaluate the extent to which retail planning exhibits evidence of path dependence

The first aim of this research project was achieved through the detailed historical analysis conducted in Chapters 4 through 10. Starting first with the theoretical and conceptual foundations of retail planning and then working chronologically towards the present day, these chapters illustrated the strong strategic continuity in retail planning, which has occurred despite the profound changes that have occurred in wider society. It was shown that the theoretical and conceptual ideas that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the ideological principles that were embedded in planning practice at the same time, have come to have a defining influence over how planners understand the evolution of retail environments and their role and purpose. Accordingly, it was also shown that despite the profound changes that have occurred in the period since, not only in terms of retail, but also in society, the economy and politics more widely, these underlying principles have been able to pervade and maintain a dominant position in influencing strategic decision-making in retail planning.

In Chapter 10, it was argued that retail planning shows significant evidence of path dependence, particularly in relation to its conceptual and ideological foundations. As such, it was suggested that path dependence could provide a viable explanation for the continuing pervasiveness of town-centre-first in planning today. However, it was noted that while path dependence can serve as useful means to understand *how* town-centre-first has been able to pervade, it does not in itself, explain *why* this is has been the case. Accordingly, it was proposed that one possible explanation in this regard, was the increasingly tendency of planning more widely to err towards risk averse decision making. In this sense, it was proposed that psychological influences may be

partly responsible for the increased tendency of planners to make risk averse decisions and that, as a result, this has provided the necessary conditions for certain historical ideas to pervade, both in terms of the collective consciousness of planners, as well as the wider mechanisms of town planning. It was noted at the end of Chapter 10, however, that such a supposition would require empirical evidence before it could be considered a viable explanation.

Aim Two – To determine how local planning authorities understand the contemporary process of retail decline and to establish the extent to which contemporary retail planning strategies are being formulated in response to this process

The second aim of this research project was achieved through the primary research phase, the findings and analysis of which were presented in Chapters 11 and 12. In Chapter 11, the main issues being experienced by local authorities were assessed, as were their likely causes, as understood by local planners. It was subsequently shown that this position broadly accorded with other local stakeholders and wider sectoral evidence, suggesting that planners have a clear understanding of the processes of change occurring in retail today. In Chapter 12, the strategic response of local planning authorities was considered and it was shown here that, while planners have a clear understanding of the processes of change, there remains a tendency for this to be conceptualised in terms of an historical understanding of the expected form and function of retail environments. As such, it was suggested that this was resulting in contemporary retail planning strategies erring towards the maintenance of existing strategic approaches, which were fundamentally based upon enforcing a town-centre-first policy.

Aim Three – To identify the primary influences of contemporary retail planning strategies and to consider the extent to which historically pervasive influences continue to impact upon decision making in retail planning today

The final aim of this research project was achieved through a combination of the historical and contemporary analysis presented in Chapters 10 through 13. In taking the data collected and presented in Chapters 11 and 12, it was subsequently shown in

Chapter 13, that there are three identifiable strands of historically pervasive influence in contemporary retail planning strategies. As such, it was argued that contemporary retail planning practice continues to exhibit evidence of path dependence and that this path dependence can be considered a viable explanation for how town-centre-first has been able to pervade in retail planning. However, in building upon the suggestion made in Chapter 10, that path dependence can only explain the *how* and not the *why*, it was subsequently suggested that thought must be given to understanding the deeper and more nebulous influences of retail planning.

The remainder of Chapter 13, therefore, sought to interrogate the empirical evidence presented in Chapters 11 and 12, to determine if it lent support to the theoretical ideas that had been discussed in the latter part of Chapter 10. In particular, this part of the thesis sought to explore that idea that ‘fear’, as an emotional state, may provide the missing link in explaining why it is that historically rooted ideas, such as town-centre-first, are able to pervade in retail planning. As part of this process, it was proposed that the apparent resistance to change in retail planning might be reflective of the increasingly risk-averse nature of decision-making in planning practice, a tendency that itself may be reflective of the underlying influence of fear, as an emotional state in planning. In this regard, evidence was presented, which showed that it was possible to establish a potentially ‘causal’ link between the strategic decisions being taken by planners and the psychological influence of ‘fear’. As such, it was ultimately argued that in attempting to understand the path dependent nature of strategic decision-making in retail planning, it is necessary to look beyond the manifestly evident influences and consider the potential impact of the psychological mindset of planners and the cultural mindset of planning practice more widely.

14.3 Limitations of Research

The work presented in this thesis has provided an important insight into how contemporary strategies for retail development are being formulated in planning and, in doing so, has shown that retail planning exhibits evidence of path dependence. In considering why this has become the case, it has been proposed that deeply rooted psychological influences may play an important role, with evidence from this project suggesting that such influences may be partly responsible for the tendency of planners to adopt risk averse strategic approaches. However, it would be remiss not

to acknowledge that, while this research project has met the aims it set out to achieve, there are some inevitable limitations to its findings. Foremost among these is the issue of applicability to the wider population, which, as was noted in Chapter 3, is a common limitation with qualitative research of this type. While there is strong evidence to suggest that path dependence in retail planning is likely to be widespread, the assertion that psychological influences may be an important influence in contemporary retail planning practice is based upon data collected from a limited sample group. As such, while it is contended that the findings from this research project do lend support to existing theoretical and conceptual ideas in this area (see Ferreira, 2013; Sanderock, 2004; Sturzaker and Lord, 2017), its applicability to the wider population is limited. In this instance, the research could be made more robust by performing multiple sample interviews across the country, although as was noted in Chapter 3, this was beyond the realistic scope of this project.

Another limitation of this research project relates to the assertion that it may be pertinent to consider psychological influences, such as fear, as an important factor in the decision-making behaviours of planners. While the analytical chapters of thesis have borrowed heavily from the psychological literature on decision-making, it is important to note that no ‘true’ psychological research has been conducted during this project. In this sense, while evidence presented in Chapter 13, does provide what is considered to be, a robust, theoretically grounded explanation for how both risk aversion and fear can, and potentially do, influence decision making in retail planning, it cannot be considered definitive proof, due to the lack of rigorous psychological study. Nevertheless, it is contended that the proposed explanation provided in this thesis, should be seen to provide real-world contextual evidence to support existing psychological research. In this instance, some form of interdisciplinary research collaboration between psychology and planning researchers could help to overcome this issue, as the two groups would be able to bring a unique insight regarding their specific disciplinary backgrounds.

A final limitation of this research project relates to the potential ‘obsolescence’ of its research findings, reflective of the lengthy timescale over which it has been developed. The pace of change within retail over the last 10-15 years has been

profound and evidence of this can be found by looking at the changes in the strategic position of retail firms, which have changed markedly during this time. Accordingly, it could be argued that, as this research project is dealing with a fast-paced sector that is liable to change, drawing definitive conclusions from temporally static data could be a risky endeavour. The data presented in this thesis was collected in the first half of 2017; however, given the evidence of strategic continuity and lack of change within retail planning, it is contended that this is unlikely to be an issue in this case, because lack of change is one of the defining characteristics of strategic decision-making in retail planning. Nevertheless, in order to address an issue such as this, it would likely be beneficial to collect multiple series of data at repeated intervals, in order to establish a longitudinal data set, which would help to address any temporal limitations.

14.4 Future Research

The research findings presented in this thesis are considered to have made a significant contribution to the small, but growing body of literature that seeks to understand the decision making process in planning. The detailed historical analysis of retail planning in England has provided a strong evidence base upon which it has been asserted that the practice of retail planning has become path dependent. This has been further supported by empirical data collected during the primary research phase, which has enabled the thesis to provide a compelling explanation for continuing pervasiveness of town-centre-first, as a strategic approach within retail planning. Subsequent to this, the research project has sought to delve deeper into the process of decision-making in retail planning, specifically considering how psychological influences may affect this process. Following the lead of others in this area (see Ferreira, 2013; Sandercock 2004; Sturzaker and Lord, 2017), this thesis has considered how such a process may occur, and through careful analysis of primary research data, has offered some tentative evidence that may support the notion that ‘fear’ serves an a notable influence over strategic decision making in retail planning.

In considering a future direction for continued research, there are several ways that this project could be extended, in order to provide a deeper assessment of how planning is responding to town centre decline. As was noted above, one potential avenue would be to repeat data collection over an extended time-period, in order to

establish a longitudinal data set of strategic development in retail planning. Such an endeavour would not only help to reaffirm the robustness of findings, but would also enable a more detailed assessment of how psychological influences affect decision-making in planning. Similarly, the research could be adapted to have a greater psychological focus, in order that the specific cognitive processes that affect decision-making in planning be identified. In this instance, it is likely that some form of inter-disciplinary study with psychologists would be necessary.

Another potential avenue of research would be to broaden the pool of respondents to include other local stakeholders, such as local politicians and community groups. This research has illustrated a fundamental disconnect between how planners and retailers/developers are conceptualising change in retail today, and it would be interesting to see whether the same disconnect exists with other groups. This would provide a clearer insight into the extent to which path dependence, risk aversion and fear are influencing contemporary retail planning practice. Similarly, it would also be interesting to assess comparatively the strategic responses of planners in England with their counterparts in Scotland, or elsewhere in Western Europe, where the broader contextual circumstances of planning practice are likely to be slightly, but not wholly, different.

14.5 Concluding Remarks

This thesis has provided a detailed assessment of how contemporary local authority retail planning strategies are being formulated and, in doing so, has shown that the practice of planning for retail development has become path dependent. In seeking to understand why this has become the case, it has been proposed that retail planning is characterised by risk-averse decision-making, which arguably reflects the influence of fear, as an emotional state of mind in planning practice. While there remains, a considerable amount of work to be done on this subject, before we can conclusively say that ‘fear’ shapes strategic decision-making in planning, this thesis has presented a compelling case to support this assertion and lend weight to the growing calls for a more psychologically rooted assessment of planning behaviour. What’s more, in the end, perhaps planners themselves can become involved in the development of work in this area, so that they can become more mindful of their own limitations and the various cognitive biases that affect the way they make decisions. As such, it is hoped

that perhaps one day, planning can return to a more positive mindset, that this thesis contends is absolutely necessary if our towns and cities are to thrive in the future.

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